

M I C H A E L C I S C O



THE GOLEM

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MICHAEL CISCO



Cheeky Frawg Books
Tallahassee, Florida

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Cheeky Frawg
POB 4248
Tallahassee, FL 32315
vanderworld@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Paul Tremblay

“Threads coming together again . . . ”

The Golem is not without antecedents.

A golem is an animate being wholly constructed from inanimate material. One of the most famous stories in Jewish folklore is the Golem of Prague: In the late 1500s, Rabbi Loew fashioned a golem out of clay to protect Prague’s Jewish ghetto from the pogroms of the Holy Roman Emperor. Rabbi Loew etched the word “emet” (truth) on the clay forehead of the Golem, bringing it to life. In most accounts the Golem became increasingly violent, killing Gentiles and eventually turning on the people it was supposed to protect. Rabbi Loew deactivated the Golem by erasing the first letter from the golem’s forehead. “Emet” was transformed to “met,” *truth* transformed to *dead*. According to folklore, the body of the Golem is kept in the attic of Prague’s Old New Synagogue and it could again be restored to life if the single word on its forehead was to be transformed again; *dead* changed back to *truth*.

(“I suppose he’ll always come back.”)

Award-winning author Jeff VanderMeer has aptly referred to Michael Cisco as “the American Kafka.” Franz Kafka, one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, was born in Prague, the city of Rabbi Loew’s Golem. Kafka’s parents were Jewish, middle-class, and German-speaking. His surrealistic fiction is often concerned with outsiders mercilessly pitted against bureaucracy and/or the menacing and dehumanizing vagaries of the state. In the oddly humorous and endlessly unsettling *The Trial*, bank clerk Josef K. is arrested by an unknown authority with his charges/crimes never being revealed to him. In his masterpiece, *The Metamorphosis*, salesman Gregor Samsa, who hasn’t missed a day of work in five years despite loathing his job, wakes to find himself transformed into a monstrous insect;

his spirit initially trapped, then conforming to his grotesque, chitinous vessel.

(“*Many will eventually recede so far that they stare out in horror at the boundaries of their own bodies.*”)

“I feel that spiced breath from the mummified lungs once more.”

The Golem is a sequel to Michael Cisco’s visionary first novel, *The Divinity Student*.

In the novel, which introduces the dreamlike desert city of San Veneficio, the Divinity Student is cut open, gutted, and then filled with pages torn from ancient books. Resurrected, he is sent to San Veneficio by agents of the shadowy seminary to rebuild the Lost Catalogue of Unknown Words; a vocabulary of a menacing God. He finds many of the words hidden within the memories of the dead. By the end of the novel, paranoid, broken, but obsessed with his inscrutable mission of the missing words, the Divinity Student is pulled almost entirely into the dead’s unreality.

In *The Golem*, exhumed by bumbling body-snatching detectives, the Divinity Student is again resurrected, or re-resurrected (“*clouds of torn paper flutter out from between his lips*”) by mysterious means. In a doorless, black room full of control consoles, an enigmatic entity silently makes adjustments. The Divinity Student’s return is described as a great fall, a fall from grace, or toward grace; a horrid, rotten grace, one he’d reject if he could. (“*I don’t want to get well!*”) The first words the Divinity Student speaks are, “*It’s not what you think.*”

Convinced that he cannot simply keep the formaldehyde flowing through his veins, that he cannot keep his patchwork-self together for much longer, and in an effort to pursue his former fiancée, (“*The bargain was struck some time ago, in a dream.*”) the magician Christine Dalman (“*Everything reacts to her, people, buildings, sky and ground.*”) down into the underworld, the Divinity Student builds a golem to act as a vessel for his battered and weary spirit. With the help of his butcher friend now turned knife-thrower for the local circus, the Divinity Student builds the monster from assorted body parts culled in the great morgue. The flesh is molded in his imperfect image. The Golem, like the Divinity Student, is full of pages, words, and formaldehyde.

(“*he will know from me . . . I will be in him . . . but he will not be in me . . .*”)

“He can’t act unless summoned to act, by the story he is living.”

The Golem is a scream, a howl of the ambition and audacity of imagination.

The language of this novel is that of images. Cisco juxtaposes intricate scenes of phantasmagoria bursting with curated detail to the stark binary of white and dark: black words on white pages; a flash of white skull peering from beneath a dark wound; San Veneficio with its plazas of white-plastered coffee shops and white-shirted citizens, its white muslin sheets acting as film screens (there are many references to flickering images of film); Christine’s luminously pale skin, her dark red silk sleeves and dress, and swarmed by butterflies the color of scarlet rose petals; and finally, the desert surrounding the city and its black mountains and black sky illuminated only by a terrible field of white stars.

The alchemy of words ceasing to be words, words seamlessly melting before our eyes into grandiose imagery, into soaring hallucination, into fever dreams that tap directly into our subconscious and perfectly describe emotions that cannot be described is something that no author achieves with more effect than Michael Cisco.

The Golem is an intimate, private conversation with an artist. An artist in perpetual pursuit.

The Golem is Michael Cisco, the author, the artist, the one who divines from our dreams and nightmares.

We are all his Divinity Students and we are all his golems. We are the ones he pries open and fills with his pages, his words, and those words transform us.

(“we are all phantoms manufactured from words”)

PROLOGUE

Threads coming together again with a racing, vertiginous feeling, speeding down a tunnel hands thrown up in shock and dismay—it's time, a darkness falls open below—

Read: a white room, wide white pallet, a long window with Venetian blinds, a closet, one door hanging open, a mirror on the inside of the door. Mild, milky light snowing across the thick carpets and across the walls, everything quiet. The room is empty; no one is here. Turn to leave with a tearing disengaging feeling and see in the mirror a collapsed figure, the nearer hand sweeping heavy as stone and slow as he turns to go, hanging his head and turning like one turns to run from a nightmare, straining inside against his body as it petrifies into gray film and slows . . . and slows . . . tragically not stopping—helplessly jammed in time, jammed stagnant and decaying.

Miles beneath this white room, a lightless black room filled with control panels is embedded in the rock, hands and eyes fluttering like bats above illuminated displays. Now and then a hand or an eye flaps up to make control adjustments, suddenly animated. The keys thrill again to the purposive touch of icy fingers. Turning from the mirror, emptiness opens at his feet and he falls fixed in an endless shift of equilibrium, arcing forward hands thrown up to protect but so slowly that he feels his body ticking through increments of space. When he finally drops it's as though a hand had turned him out of its palm, and he falls, spinning, closet light and mirror winking out in space above him.

Now—this is always difficult—boundless space on all sides. His pupils dilate until the iris splits, his back arching headfirst downward, neck whipping right and left in the onrush of air. Repeated pulses of nausea, he vomits from an empty stomach, stinging bile churning between the teeth, up the cheeks, over the chin, into the nose and ears, hair, splattering the throat, searing the eyes. Doubled-up spins faster screaming without hearing the screams, screams unheard by anyone. A sudden cold sensation on a wet face, a struggle to breathe through ropes of mucus, eyes tearing

uncontrollably, a stink, unraveling body. Wild attempt to catch hold of something, a pawing out with hands. Very soon, there is no physical sensation, no sense of his own body, only an intensifying forward tilt of falling, expansion of a body, weightlessness, rigid and uncoupling, crashing through soap-bubble panes of space like icy glass, numbed; this falling body begins to trope through all its forms.

In the darkroom, hands on controls.

The outer surface of a skin comes first, bleached opacous white, then raw red eyes, raw as raw meat in hot eye sockets, thin hair—the color rilling out of it draining transparent fibers, finger and toenails flick past, teeth turn clear over incandescent nerves and blue and red blood vessels, oil beads appear on the skin and then spread in the force of the wind writing trickle-patterns across skin tightened and painful. His back hunches and seams, distending in funnel-shaped white loops of manta-ray flesh, opening in the front to catch the air and tapering back through rings of convulsing muscle to stream out through openings in his sides, two jet sheets of air streaming across a lower back and some trailing legs, blurred chalky white like fish under murky water.

Burning cold air, stabbing and knotting in his muscles as he gnashes soft teeth, angling himself up to push himself up off the air and stop his fall. His body restored for the first time, rigid in its full weight, he retches again and it pours down out of him, tan jelly mixed with tiny threads of blood, caustic against his oily skin. His ears pop and then crack, and his eyelids squeeze together oozing tears that steam off his cold cheeks, his hair prickling. He is strangling and toppling unconscious—turning in midair, end over end, slower and slower, like someone turning in a nightmare, clicking through separate increments of space, spinning down through clouds and a dimming night sky. Below him, a desert landscape ringed with mountains, a city gleaming with light, and beyond its walls a sea of reflected lights shining in pairs, watching.

Elsewhere, hands flutter and adjust the controls, and then *hold*.

To be read another time, a separate time.

There are two kinds of priests or priestly people. One sort are linked by tradition to the lives of their parishioners—they perform socially. These are the kind who organize charities, who extend aid to the needy, who regard the well-being and happiness of all their flock as personal responsibilities. The other variety exists in mortal terror and loathing of the material world,

and recoils from every object as if it pricked like a needle—and that pinprick is a conduit to a withering current of anguish that flows from contact and which floods them to the core, like an infection and a lingering illness. This second type will take what limited refuge it can in the cloistered, monastic life, where everything is assiduously marked and branded with the icons and names of the divine, giving these objects an elevated status as corporeal components of ideas, making the fact of their material existence less chilling. But once begun, the process by which these priests shrink from the physical world is difficult to arrest. Many will eventually recede so far that they stare out in horror at the boundaries of their own bodies, feeling at every instant the impossible weight and degradation of their filthy garment of flesh. They walk cowed and bent, with their heads drooping to one side, their eyes screwed up so as not to see too much or too clearly, and their bodies are dwindled and transparent, as if they've begun to evaporate in the rarefied air of their retreat. All the force of their faith and expectation is directed toward the moment when they will finally lose themselves once and for all in limitless absolute noumenal perfection, and anything not also touched, and flawed, by the idea of perfection, is forever beyond their grasp. The Divinity Student is one of these.

If there's ever a film . . . clouds and sun, sunlight ebbing and flowing in clouds.

THE PREFECT'S DREAM

Arms fling the curtain apart, and darkness pours out. No moon tonight; the desert exhales powdery ropes of darkness, as glacially indifferent and absent as the sky, with a positive substance of darkness. From horizon to horizon the only light comes from San Veneficio. I feel that spiced breath from mummified lungs once more. The marble domes and brass onion-shaped minarets, high glass ornaments and quartz monuments, all gleam in a field of diffused light, concentrated here and there at bright points, from whence it issues, and overhead the stars collect that shine without radiance, and out in the desert giant monitor lizards, the size of horses, have emerged from their daytime hiding places to watch the city as they do every night, standing completely still, the city lights reflected in their enormous eyes. Looking out from the city walls, one is hemmed in on all sides by blankly staring eyes, beaming in pairs from the desert floor below. The beam from each eye is a thread in a web they weave out of San Veneficio's light, which strains the desert's exhalations through its mesh, and binds the city to the ground like a net, to prevent the desert from releasing it into the sky.

From a distance, looking back, the city is hemmed in only from behind, because the monitors in front have their backs turned, and their eyes cannot be seen from out here. Then, one pair of eyes detaches itself from the others and begins to move in this direction. They pass the city and continue out into the desert, without dimming or changing in intensity, although they flicker as the car goes over a bump in the road—those are headlights, not eyes. The car is following a pale ribbon of compacted clay, heading for a low hill outside town. Now it stops at the base of the hill, pointing its weak lights up toward the peak. They shine on a few desultory dead trees and collapsed iron fencing, and on a flat broken stone thrusting up from the ground.

Somewhere, within the walls, the Prefect of Police is awake, sitting in his nightshirt by the telephone. One hour ago, he started from sleep, his mind a chaos of dream fragments. He often has these especially alarming, unspeakably shocking dreams, which invariably prove prescient. Even in

the alarm of his first few waking moments, as his eyes swept back and forth over the contents of his dark and sinister bed chamber, a familiar feeling of satisfaction came over him as he recognized the telltale signs of an oracular visitation. Within a minute or two, he had perfectly regained his composure; he suavely resorted to the telephone, summoning his two principle detectives, like two pet devils, from their sleep.

Now, three men emerge from the back of the car and open the trunk. The pet devils appear from the front to watch. Picks and shovels are shouldered, and the five of them make their way up through dead, waist-high grass. The grass rattles in the wind, rather two winds mixed, one warm and one cold. The two detectives have no tools because they're in charge, and they are moving back and forth among the tombstones now, peering at inscriptions with a small lantern. Their seamed, impassive faces loom down in the feeble yellow light of the lamp, and for a moment hang suspended in black space above the graves—the air is very clear. Then they move on. From grave to grave until they've seen them all, and then they pause and put their heads together. The wind comes up again, and the dead trees scrape their branches. The two men make up their minds and wave the lantern at a grave with a blank stone.

One of the workers carves an X in the baked-hard ground, and then together they plunge their picks into the breast of the grave, breaking up the clay and dragging it aside. Their overseers stand and watch, and yawn and check their watches. The car's headlights blanket the hilltop with a tawny spray of dim light, barely enough to see by, or to obscure the yawning sky overhead. Now they drop their picks for shovels because there is soft loam beneath the clay. There is no sound except the scooping and choughing of the shovels and the hiss of the wind in the grass.

As the grave deepens around the digging figures, the wind catches in quick eddies around their feet, stirring the dry soil and whistling in the small tunnels and burrowings that the shovels uncover. The wind brushes away the last thin veil of dirt. Wedging their feet awkwardly around the sides of the coffin, they work the ropes underneath and then step gingerly up onto it, kneeing themselves back up into the stiff grass overhead. The detectives, whose names are Pracke and Kipe, approach, and look down into the grave. Its walls are lined with tiny colored lights embedded in the dry dirt, flickering in little pools of blue, green, red, and yellow, dappling the white ropes with regular patches of color. Kipe nods to the others, and

they take hold of the lines. The coffin seems to float up to the surface; the lights winking out as it passes them, leaving all dark below, streaks of tiny colors gliding across the unvarnished sides and lid, the iron handles . . .

With an effort, they lay it gently beside the grave, and no sooner do the lines fall slack than two men rush forward and start pulling the nails out of the lid. The wind carries the sound of complaining wood down the hill and across the road. The last nails pop out simultaneously, one at the foot, one at the head, and the workers turn their eyes to Kipe and Pracke. Kipe nods again. The others look at each other, and then they ease the lid off. A lizard sits on the body's chest; it jerks its head up, staring directly at the two detectives. Pracke steps forward, languidly shooing it back into the grave. He moves slowly, standing over the open coffin, gazing steadily at its occupant.

Kipe comes up behind him, peering over his shoulder. With two fingers he nudges his partner in the back, and Pracke reaches into his coat pocket and brings out one of the Prefect's handkerchiefs. Carefully he handles it, touching only the embroidered edges with the ends of his long fingernails. So suspended, he holds it up against the night sky to flutter in the wind for a moment like a flag, showing an all but luminous unstained white square with initials in one corner. Slowly Pracke bends, and turns in space over the body, and lays the handkerchief over the dead face. It settles there, creased along the middle.

Together, Pracke and Kipe stand and wait. The others have retreated a little way off, watching the open box, intent and anxious. They are all totally still. The hissing in the grass abates, and suddenly the sounds of the city far off in the distance are just audible again, and the long low breaths of the monitors who are also watching, also totally still.

A dark spot appears near the center of the handkerchief. It spreads as they look and start and others appear, the cloth begins to sag inwards a little with a new weight of bloodstains and then his hand reaches as he sits up to lift it from his face, crumpling the cloth in his hand. He's sitting up, staring at it intently, with all his concentration. The momentum of his forward motion levers him to his feet in one continuous slow upward curve, his heavy black coat brushing the edge of the coffin. Pracke recoils without moving, feeling his body sinking into itself, an uncontrollable shuddering inside, his throat tightens and he feels a hot, weird pressure behind his eyes —Kipe also feels this way, he can tell even without looking. All he did was

step out of the coffin, hovering a little above the ground, looking at them, the light from the headlights reflected in his glasses. The figure looks like it was smeared there like a smudge on a pane of glass—except for the shining spectacles. Kipe makes a convulsive gesture meant to signal one of the men to turn off the headlights; those two disgusting reflections, angled to one side with the tilt of his head—Pracke imagines them gone, the figure occluded by ordinary shadows, and the thought merges with a hysterical impulse to shut off the lights so that he won't have to keep looking at him. He imagines their relief if the figure, crying out or dropping to his knees, would take sadness and hopelessness back into himself—they're paralyzed—Kipe realizes he's looking back at them.

Then he abruptly settles his feet on the ground, the full weight of his body returning. A moment later he's gone.

Pracke runs to the edge of the cemetery and scans the slope. Down below, a dark figure is bobbing through the grass. He turns to Kipe and the workers, telling them to bring the car, and then he takes off down the hill. Lights sweep drunkenly behind him as he hurries, and then, turning round the incline and onto a narrow dirt path, he's out of sight of the car. In a few moments, he is walking beside the Divinity Student. For the first time, he notices that the Divinity Student has a ponderous metal brace running the length of his right leg, which nevertheless appears to support most of his weight as he walks, trailing dead earth from his shoes. Pracke hadn't seen it under the coattails at first, or perhaps it hadn't been there before. The Divinity Student is gasping with the strain to keep moving with eyes fixed straight ahead, set on San Veneficio, and clouds of torn bits of paper flutter out from between his lips. His shoulder slams hard against a tree and he spins to one side, careening over a rock by the side of the road. He crashes down into the dead grass, flailing his arms and legs. His head rears up, eyes twitching back and forth, and his legs and arms writhe underneath him in a completely uncoordinated attempt to get him back on his feet. Kipe pulls up on the running board of the car, jumping off lightly and rejoining Pracke. They are accustomed to handling dead bodies, but they hesitate to approach the Divinity Student, who is seething back and forth in the tall grass like a broken machine. Eventually, Pracke musters himself and steps forward. Seizing one shoulder, then Kipe the other, together they drag the Divinity Student toward the car. Under his coat he feels like a bag of sticks, his joints poking out in all directions, wrapped in flesh like wet cardboard. He

exhales a few more bits of paper with a retching sound and goes limp. Pracke and Kipe push his chin down onto his chest and load him professionally into the car, accidentally battering his leg brace on the fender and front seats a few times. They crumple him against the opposite door and clamber in swiftly behind, shoving the broken leg underneath the front seat to make room for their feet.

During the trip back, they avoid looking at him, sitting close together against the opposite door. Occasionally, Pracke glances at the other side of the car, but there is nothing to see but a vague patch of denser darkness against the blue-black desert flashing by the window. Motes of light from the city start to accumulate in the car as they approach, condensing into an almost invisible haze around them, dusting the Divinity Student's face and hands so that they glow faintly, the color of sour milk. The car passes through the city gates and he lunges backward like he's just touched a live wire striking his head hard against the ceiling, then jerks to one side, crashes once against the door, and goes still again. Everyone in the car turns to look, Pracke and Kipe staring mutely from the other end of the seat—it took only a moment. The Divinity Student is cluttered across the door, his right temple against the window, looking straight ahead—the driver shunts quickly through traffic, toward the police annex.

From the window, the Divinity Student watches people passing in the busy streets. The streetlights peer down overhead, and the people's faces and clothes are folded, with heavy shadows pointing down. The thick glass of the window muffles their voices, so that only a melodic hum is audible, like an orchestra tuning up. Standing in doorways, sitting outside on patio chairs, pushing vending carts with hanging strings of bells, walking alone or with another or in groups, walking pets, standing against a wall, entering and leaving buildings, chasing across the street, each with a valence trailing a wake like a fan of cords woven out of each gesture, and each wake mixing currents in the street with the lights and traffic, a flock of pigeons scattering in front of the car and swimming around the window where the Divinity Student sits, drawn down the street in the closed car. It veers to the left and stops on an empty side lane with steep iron-faced buildings looming up on either side, and then rocks as they get out. Kipe opens the opposite door and the Divinity Student staggers forward off-balance; he stops himself, planting his heavy braced leg. While Pracke and Kipe pay the diggers, he shambles out into the middle of the cobbled street, his head lolling forward.

A car with blazing lights careens around the corner. The men look up. It accelerates down the street, howling and shrieking, steering for the Divinity Student, who stands facing the other side of the road, oblivious. He buckles and flies upward bouncing once on the hood and again across the windshield shattering it with his leg brace, his body spins over the car beneath him and then dashes to the ground—the car wheels around the corner and disappears. Pracke and Kipe run over.

“Is he all right?” Kipe is bending over him.

“He wasn’t all right to begin with.” Pracke kneels by the Divinity Student. His body is bent, face down, palms up, the legs twisted to one side. They take him by the shoulders and help him stand, steering him toward one of the gaunt doorways on the nearer side of the street.

“The Coroner ought to have a look at him,” Kipe suggests, trying to get a better purchase on the Divinity Student’s shoulder.

Pracke appraises the Divinity Student’s condition with a cursory glance, then nods. “I don’t think he’s fit to speak with anyone right now, anyway.”

They pull him through the door, into a tall, narrow lobby with white walls and a polished wooden floor. Pausing a moment to kick the Divinity Student’s feet into position underneath him, they turn down a long, narrow hallway off to one side.

The door at the end swings open with a kick, and they drag him across the threshold. The room beyond is a warehouse of huge banks of tall freezing-cabinets for the storage of bodies. Each one is divided into compartments with shiny steel trapdoors and tongues of metal on rollers for holding the corpses. Aluminum ladders glide along metal tracks atop each cabinet. Luxurious fans hang over the broad avenues between the freezers, spinning slowly in the thin air near the ceiling. The floor is gleaming white tile, glowing in the dim light. Here and there along the walls are small offices with corrugated steel walls and small-paned frosted windows.

Pracke and Kipe head for an office in the rear corner, with a gurney and a few racks of surgical and garden tools, resting in glass cases filled with green sterile solution, out in front. With a final effort, they drag the Divinity Student into the enclosure and toss him into a swivel chair, which rolls backwards under his weight until it raps against the flimsy corrugated wall. Pracke sits down by the desk, and Kipe goes to find the Coroner.

The Coroner is there a moment later, still dressed in his white autopsy outfit, rubber gloves, apron, and skullcap. He has a young face with an

earnest expression. He radiates energy. Kipe stands in the doorway and indicates the Divinity Student with a theatrical gesture. The Coroner steps in and begins studying the Divinity Student immediately, peering into his throat and ears, listening to his chest, tapping his knees. He works silently, with sure, steady hands. He takes a big embalming syringe from his apron and drives the long, thick needle into the Divinity Student's neck, angling down toward his shoulder. Holding the syringe in his left fist, he strongly draws the plunger back and a thick, clear fluid flows viscously up into the dropper, threaded with tiny grains of black. The Coroner pulls the needle out abruptly and squirts some of the liquid onto his fingertip, holding it up to the single lightbulb in the room, hanging over the desk, looks at, and then smells it. He frowns and wipes his hands on his apron. He steps forward and pulls back the Divinity Student's eyelids, staring at his eyes.

“He’s blind.”

“ . . . He didn’t act blind.”

He produces a little flashlight and shines it in the Divinity Student’s face. Then he looks around at them.

“I don’t see how these eyes could possibly work.”

Then he seems to think of something. He presses his palm across the Divinity Student’s forehead, and then lays the back of his fingers against his right cheek, leaving behind fading purple bruise-marks on the Divinity Student’s paste-colored face.

“He’s got a fever. A high high fever.”

“Contagious?”

“If it is, you’ve already been exposed plenty.” He puts his hands on his hips. “But I suspect it has more to do with decomposition.”

With his right hand, he gently touches his first two fingers to one side of the Divinity Student’s throat. “Yes he’s very sick,” he says, almost to himself.

The Coroner is distracted; his eyes wander. Then, abruptly turning his attention to the legs, he kneels and starts fiddling with the brace.

“I didn’t expect he’d have that,” Pracke says.

“It’s welded on,” the Coroner says, rocking the hinges in his fingers. “Tight as a vice from his ankle to his hip.”

“Is his leg broken?” Kipe asks.

“It would have to be—in at least two or three places. Permanent breaks, most likely. I’d have to cut the brace off to find out.” He inclines his head

and thinks. "I'll leave it," he says, "unless you insist?"

They shake their heads no.

The Coroner steps back and looks at the Divinity Student as a whole. He takes a flask of formaldehyde from his back pocket, sets it on the desk, and sits down, still looking at the Divinity Student. Suddenly, the Divinity Student springs from the chair, his eyes wide open, and he seizes the bottle. He bashes the top against the edge of the desk, breaking off its short neck and spilling a little onto the floor, filling the room with a familiar smell that neither Pracke nor Kipe had smelled before. The Divinity Student jams the jagged mouth of the bottle against his lips, tips his head back, gulping convulsively, his eyes jerking shut and tearing. The Coroner's face is only inches away, watching him, motionless. The Divinity Student drains the bottle and drops it on the desk; it clunks and rocks back and forth; the Coroner's hand stops it. They're all staring at the Divinity Student, standing with most of his weight on his braced leg, wet mouth hanging open and ragged from the broken glass, but no blood, no gasping. He curls backward, settling into the chair and silence again.

"Well, is he okay?" Pracke asks after a moment.

"I suppose. Is that all?"

"Well, will he be able to speak with the Prefect?"

The Coroner produces a tongue depressor and gingerly applies it to the Divinity Student's mouth. Wrinkling his nose at the smell, he peers down the Divinity Student's throat as Pracke obligingly angles the hanging overhead light.

"As far as I can tell, he is physically capable of speech," says the Coroner, heading for the door. "Whether he has anything to say is none of my lookout."

Now they've given up trying to question him. One sat on his right, and the other on his left, alternating their tones and modes, threatening, cajoling, promising, enticing, waving the formaldehyde bottle in front of his face—nothing. A voice on the telephone informed Pracke that the Prefect had already returned to his bed, and would inspect the remains in the morning. The detectives went away, locking the door behind them.

The Divinity Student has been lying on the desk for several hours, in the dark, motionless. With a single jolt of one shoulder he now rolls to one side and collapses to the floor knocking the desk chair over. Using his cane, produced from the lining of his coat, he tries several times to get to his feet,

repeating the same useless, spasmodic motions every time. Finally, he somehow levers himself upright and propels himself out the door, knocking it open with his weight alone. His surplus momentum carries him down the corridor between the freezer units, shining ghostly blue in the dark warehouse. He blunders out into the street, and reels drunkenly on the pavement, flapping his desiccated arms like a mummified bat. The Divinity Student shambles down the street.

Nearly blind, with painstaking effort he traces the textures and shapes of each facade with his heated fingertips until they cool against cool stone and thick polished wood, cool as if it were saturated with cold water. The wood glides silently back into the shadows on rough iron hinges and the darkness of the chapel swallows him. With spidery steps he crosses the nave and pulls up before a stained-glass window gleaming faintly above him, suspended, shining, in shadows. Scaffolding scales the pillars—the ceiling is being restored. There is a length of rope among the tools by the base of one of the pillars. The Divinity Student picks it up, works it for a moment, and then looks up. He can now see. With his shaking hands, he throws the line up, and it catches in a hook-like projection of stone at the top of the arch. The rope hangs in silhouette against the window, its dangling loop encircles an angel's face. The Divinity Student pulls himself up the scaffolding with one arm, holding the end of the rope in his other hand. He gets to the top of the scaffold, and with a single gesture swings himself onto the platform. He ties the rope to the trellis, leans out, seizes the swinging noose, and fastens it around his head. Then he climbs back out on the scaffolding, taking up as much slack as possible. He kicks out with his braced leg, dropping a few feet straight down and then stopping abruptly. With clement eyes, the angels watch him swing back and forth.

THE MORGUE AND THE BREWERY

Of course there is a circus in San Veneficio—open warehouses with dirt floors and straw on the ground. The nightly audience sits hushed and excited in fleets of folding chairs on graduated risers, with their backs to the open air. In the center ring, Teo rises up from over his table gleaming with knives to face racks of mirrors, one in front of the other, lined up forty feet away, with small spaces in between, several side by side. They catch his reflection like the knives on the table, blazing with the white of his spotless uniform. With nimble, scarred fingers, he raises one blade and then another, hurling them with lightning speed at the mirrors, snapping them faster and faster, his right hand does all the throwing, his left hand feeds the knives one after another, until Teo's hands are a blur eating knives from the table and flashing each one a shining reflection of Teo's tense face to dash through the mirrors and plunge through his face, his hands, his chest and abdomen, arms and legs, a blazing stream of spinning knives buzzing from his hands and chasing each other into the mirrors, breaking them in sequence and crowding after each other in their haste, thunking solidly into silvered glass and plywood backings. As the last knives leap from the table and across the room, his face is twisting, his lips furling up, baring clenched teeth. Shatter the last of his reflections and turn to face the crowd who gasp and pause to catch their breath, nearly forgetting to applaud.

Now Teo's returning later that evening to his home in an adjacent lot, an old shed, now his place to stay. His uniform blazes white in the gloom. Without putting on the lights, he steps to his closet and looks inside, by moonlight, at his old spotless apron. He brushes it with his fingertips, and pulls two big knives from his belt, holding them tight, one to each hand, bright and sharp against the dark.

Then an uncategorizable impression—a low, uneasy chord received like a tactile sensation. Or also like the minute flux of a small earth tremor, registered in his stomach like a jarring loose, or a glancing blow, the clumsy superimposition of a previous self. Teo thinks a moment, but the feeling is

gone. With care, he takes down his apron and puts it on, and then, pocketing his knives, he leaves the shack and the circus grounds.

Overhead the sky is a patchwork of clouds stitched with bright silver borders where the moon shines above. The air is clear and still, warm and cold evenly mixed, frictionless. The streets are empty, small stone buildings with little onion-shaped turrets and leaning gables, all lightless and quiet. No streetlights. No sound. Everyone is sleeping. He travels along the perimeter of the city, weaving over uneven streets, muted and expectant. Presently he turns down a narrow side street, heading for the smooth stone wall of a tiny chapel a few doors up from the corner, with two recessed stained-glass windows and a heavy wooden door, set into a telescoping, arched doorway. It glides open with a touch on rough old hinges, and inside all is dark and still. Teo passes through the door and steps down into the chapel on steps worn smooth as brook pebbles, and he scans the room in the dim half-light from the short, wide colored windows that punctuate the walls just below the flat roof. As he looks, he sees one window is broken by a shadow, slowly turning.

He approaches the far wall, and sees scaffolding against the pillars, and a twisting form dangling from a cord. Teo stops and looks at the body, and recognizes the heavy black coat and large white hands. Then involuntarily he begins to weave unevenly forward toward the body, its feet bobbing in scuffed shoes over the paving stones. He stares up at it, the toes almost scraping his nose. The Divinity Student's head hangs at an angle on his breast, his face is discolored purple and swollen. Teo stares at the creased face. Blazing white in a dead face the Divinity Student's eyes flick open and focus tremendously on Teo. The hands open outward in an image of blessing, and then point with irritation at the noose. Instantly, Teo mounts the nearest scaffold, nimbly scrambling across the trestle to peer down at the Divinity Student, just below him. With a single slice of one knife he severs the cord, and the Divinity Student falls noisily to the ground, landing on his braced leg. Teo climbs down and comes up to his side.

“It doesn’t work does it?” he asks.

The Divinity Student draws his broken cane from his coat, plants the tip firmly between two paving stones and says, “It’s not what you think.”

Teo moves to help him up, but the Divinity Student says, “Don’t touch me. I’m very sick. If you touch me you will surely die.”

He shifts his weight onto the broken leg and levers himself ponderously to his feet with a grinding, reluctant creak of his brace. He leans on the stick. Teo can see his face again—clear and wan as always, but now it's moist with sweat and clammy across the forehead and cheeks, pulsing with waves of dry sick heat, palpable even from a few feet away. There is a fading band of livid red around his neck.

Teo hefts the rope. "What was this for?"

The Divinity Student squints at it. "I don't remember," he says in a hollow voice. "Ah. Now I remember."

He starts to hobble toward the door.

"I needed to find you."

"You sent for me?" Teo asks after a moment.

The Divinity Student says, "Yes."

Teo walks up beside him and follows him out into the street.

"You and one other."

"Who?"

After a moment, "Let me stay with you again."

Teo decides it would be all right.

"... The sun will be up soon," he says.

"I wouldn't notice. It doesn't bother me any more."

"Congratulate me," he says quietly, "I'm in the circus now."

"I'm sure you are. You're the knife-thrower."

"Will you be needing my help again?"

"Yes. I'm having trouble walking, and I can hardly see anymore.

Perhaps, if I had a rest . . . "

They come to Teo's door. Before going in, the Divinity Student turns to Teo, his head shaking with an uncontrollable tremor.

"Are you still unhappy?"

Teo peers at the ravaged face, obscured by thick orange rays of light from the setting sun.

He shrugs and says, "I'm less unhappy."

The Divinity Student's face and posture do not change, and still the tremor wags his head for him.

"I wish I could help you," he says in a ragged voice. Then, without straightening his arm, he points up at the sky, looking Teo directly in the eye.

"Just do not question," he says, and turns to enter.

Teo is standing over the Divinity Student, looking down at him in the light of the setting sun. He still lies collapsed in the corner, radiating a parched, sooty heat like a cloud of hot dust, and the slatey cathedral light of gray days. Teo is staring at an oblong white spot on the Divinity Student's head, just above his right temple. At first he thought it was a speck of paint or a crumb of plaster from the chapel, but then he saw how the skin puckered around it, and realized that he was looking at the Divinity Student's skull, where the skin had worn away. He's still looking at it now. But he can see where the Divinity Student's hair is sloughing off, and how flimsily his ears adhere to his head. The tips of his fingers are slightly shriveled, and the fingernails seem ready to drop off. His skin is coarse and flaking, his eyelids transparent membranes like a single thickness of onion skin.

The Divinity Student looks slowly up at him, with a rustling of neck bones. His face is a mummy's face, the whites of his eyes are turning yellow-orange and the irises are fading, smearing, turning a wan clay-colored gray. He looks directly into Teo's face.

"I'm not perfect!" he chokes, and waves his hands over his body, "I just can't hold this together much longer!"

"Are you planning on doing anything about it?"

"I need to build a new one, a proxy, to send down. I'll need you for that . . . And we'll have to find a nice, cozy private place to work." The Divinity Student gradually musters his extremities, dragging himself upright by inching along the wall with his back until he can get his brace underneath him. He places a desiccated, tarantula-like hand on the wall and locks his other elbow, pressing down on his cane. "I'll direct you," he grunts. Teo looks at him for a moment, and then leads him out the door, limping, rickety and cadaverous, along behind and beside him. The Divinity Student seizes fragile blades of heat out of the air with his mind, not with his hand, so as not to snap them—only the insane would think to try it, but he can actually do it . . . smell of his fingers, smell of his own dry, dirt-choked body.

They return, after hours, to the morgue, down streets of dried weeds and leafless twigs rattling in the wind. For the next few days, they have the run of the place, checking the cabinets one by one, row by row, closely attended by Teo who stands ready with a dolly loaded with cleavers and saws. From time to time, the Divinity Student calls him over, tapping at a body with the

tip of his cane, and, with grim satisfaction, Teo brings down the knife, lopping hands, feet, ears and the like, comparing them to the corresponding parts of the Divinity Student with a tape measure. He raises his eyebrows and frowns, reckoning their similarity, making his selections and rejections, and then takes the chosen parts back to the dolly where they are stored in glass jars filled with formaldehyde. The grosser structures are found first, then comes the more difficult task of finding matching eyes, a proper skull, the right-shaped teeth, and the components necessary for constructing an identical face. This last obstacle requires Teo to make a chart of the Divinity Student's face, with exacting measurements of each muscle and tissue element. He has to invent his own system for categorizing degrees of muscle tone and skin tightness to insure accuracy, until he is certain within several hundredths of a millimeter of the precision of his chart.

After the first two days, the Divinity Student is no longer able to navigate the aisles by himself. He is almost completely unable to walk, and Teo must bring each selected part to his seat, leaning against the flimsy partitions of the Chief Coroner's office, for inspection. The Divinity Student is deteriorating rapidly, carefully budgeting his strength. Teo comes running up with a dripping piece of cartilage and holds it gingerly before the Divinity Student's face. With effort he focuses his eyes, now caked over with a sulfurous yellow powder, on it. His purple lips part over dry, black gums and a single tooth rattles to the floor.

Teo hollers at the top of his lungs, "Will this do?"

"Not DEAF yet," the Divinity Student rustles in a voice like paper cinders. He seizes the cartilage with two long skinny fingers, bruised nails peeling from the tips, and holds it to his nose, sniffing vigorously. Hot, dry, sickroom air boils up from his coat as it falls open, and for a moment he sits still, a pensive expression on his green face. Then he tosses the hunk of cartilage to the floor with a frown—"No good, doesn't match, find another." Splat. His face caves in and he shrinks into his seat, exhausted. Teo returns diligently to the stacks.

Finally, he emerges with a dolly bowed and creaking under a heavy load of anatomy. He sweeps his instruments into a small black bag and then stands back as the Divinity Student, now little more than a mummy, painfully climbs onto the top of the dolly. With care, he administers a fortifying sip of formaldehyde between the Divinity Student's lips. The Divinity Student slumps to one side and seems to fall asleep. While the rest

of his body is as inert as clay his right arm moves with electric, nervous energy, as though all the life in that body had momentarily concentrated in the right arm. It rummages his coat pocket and extracts a scrap of paper and a pencil nub with a rusty iron cap on one end. His hand scribbles a series of discrete numbers on the paper and then clumsily tears the paper to bits, dropping the pencil stub on the floor. Jerkily, his hand collects the paper fragments and squashes them together in his palm, then extracts a series of four at random, laying them out on his thigh. The hand flops down to his side and his head rises, his eyes rolling around until they find Teo, then flicking down to indicate the numbers. He tries to speak. Teo brings his ear close to the Divinity Student's mouth—he learns that the numbers are an address, an empty place on a street he knows, a safe place to work.

Turns out to be a derelict brewery on the outskirts of the small industrial district; a cavernous stone building with extensive underground fermenting rooms carved into the bedrock. Aboveground, the walls are a thick shell around a vast open room lined with staggering or collapsed copper brewing vats. One of the four corners on the floor plan bulges out into an enormous stone tower, most likely a sort of silo, but with a windowed observation deck at the very top. An arched aperture nearly twenty feet high and fifteen feet wide opens at its base, gaping at the empty brewery littered with old machine parts. Teo wheels in his carts of body parts and deposits them beside the operating table, isolated in a pool of light in the center of the room. Although it's on the opposite side of town from the morgue and the chapel, Teo nevertheless has the feeling that they are all connected, as wings of one colossal necropolis branching its dark, yawning hallways and limitless storage houses through the city and into the unending distance, and at every turn he half expects to see again the limitless ranks of freezer cabinets and covered gurneys, or to hear the businesslike tread of the thousands of morticians and coroner's assistants who attend the bodies. An abrupt clatter of metal wheels distracts him and he looks up to see the Divinity Student approaching the table, dragging an IV hanger on wheels along behind him, a bottle of formaldehyde draining drop by drop into his arm.

He mutters something about lightning rods and clumsily pulls a sheet of white paper the length of the platform from a roller at its foot. Teo turns and notices a bundle of lightning rods and wire at the foot of a column nearby. As the Divinity Student starts rummaging noisily among the containers and

machine parts, dumping anatomy out on the table for a last-minute inspection, Teo gathers up the rods and heads for the tower. A flight of iron stairs bolted to the inside wall of the tower circles upward to a dome a hundred feet above, but he turns off after climbing only halfway, taking a side door out onto the roof of the brewery. Stepping out into the wind, he can see dark clouds slithering ominously over the mountains, drifting across the desert toward San Veneficio. Standing before him is a plain, wooden block with a plaster bust on it, representing the tutelary angel of breweries. He picks his way across wide green copper panels to a row of exposed knobs on a rail, and fixes a rod to each knob, trailing the insulated wires behind him like the stinging tendrils of a jellyfish. This task completed, he gathers the cables into a bundle and trails them back down the stairs to the operating table. The Divinity Student is busily cobbling together something enormous, hydraulic, and many-armed, with an attached magazine of glass cases filled with formaldehyde and pieces of bodies. He glances up briefly and points to a huge pair of contacts, to which Teo attaches the cables.

When he straightens up, he can see that the Divinity Student is loading spools of surgical silk onto rows and rows of bobbins, each attached to a spidery pneumatic arm. His face is greener and thinner than ever, the skin on his brow stretched tight as a drum across his temples, and small blisters beginning to form at his hairline. He threads a bundle of needles, using his palm as a pincushion, screwing each needle into place afterward. He jerks his head up at Teo.

With an effort he says, “Now install the array.” His body buckles a little forward and he steadies himself on the edge of his stool, milky yellow-green discharge frothing at the corners of his mouth. Hands trembling, he increases the dose of formaldehyde from the IV, reaches again for another needle. Teo looks at him closely.

“You’re burning with fever. Isn’t there anything anyone can do?”

“*I don’t want to get well!*” the Divinity Student snaps. “Now would you install it?!”

Teo climbs to the top of the tower. From the observation dome he looks down over the lip of the inner wall at a shaft like the inside of a smokestack. Cautiously he picks his way around the edge, threading among piston machines, regulators, pumps, siphons, receivers, transmitters, all pressed up against the base of the dome. Finally, he steps into position. Using chains and a pulley, Teo winches a steel ring, almost as wide in diameter as the

tower itself and bristling with dozens of telescoping metal arms on all sides, to within a few inches of the base of the dome about his feet. Locking the winch, he moves slowly around the periphery, fixing the ring in place with thick steel coils, and then around again, attaching the ends of the telescoping arms to the machines on all sides. When he's finished, it looks like a wagon wheel with spokes but no central axle, floating just above the mouth of the tower. Teo checks the strength of the ring, pushing and rattling it, then returns to the lab chamber below.

He emerges from the shadows in time to see the Divinity Student slumping forward—his IV is empty, black ooze is backing up into the bottle. Shocked, Teo rushes over—the Divinity Student's brace is locked, keeping him propped upright. Teo jerks the bottle from the hook and unstoppers it, oily black ooze spouting out of it across his apron and onto the floor. Moving quickly he grabs a full bottle from the gurney and moves to reattach it to the catheter, which lies dribbling and writhing on the floor.

“Wait . . .” the Divinity Student's voice comes drifting weakly from somewhere “. . . until it runs clear . . .”

Teo slaps the hose against the ground trying to squeeze out the black stuff, and in a few moments a clear glycerous gelatin begins to trickle out of its mouth—the fungal syrup that saturates the Divinity Student's tissues in lieu of blood and lymph. One of his crooked fingers taps an empty petri dish lying on the gurney beside him—disembodied, the Divinity Student's voice speaks again, “Save it—and culture it!” Teo drains some of the clear gelatin into the dish, then plugs the tube into the fresh supply and hangs it again on the frame.

After a few moments, the Divinity Student's body begins to shudder and list, then rights itself—hands clasping the edge of the gurney in a vice-taloned grip, the head floating up, trailing knobby shoulders and withered torso like a stillborn animal trailing its afterbirth. Wheezing and sputtering black saliva, he fumbles blindly for a screwdriver and begins adjusting the machine's alignment.

“What do I tell him when he comes to?”

The Divinity Student doesn't look away from his work—“Don't worry about that—he will know from me . . . I will be in him . . . but he will not be in me . . .”

He gingerly turns to look at Teo.

“I can’t tell you anything about it, you’re used to that . . . When it happens—don’t stay—and don’t come back . . . when he has finished—I will be free again . . . and then I can protect you from any consequences . . . ”

“What if he wants my help?”

“Then help him,” the Divinity Student turns back to his machine, “ . . . just don’t stay with him.”

THE MAGICIAN

Christine Dalman, the Magician, moves to the center of the stage seeping autumn perfume, her serenely concentrated face suspended in tissues of faint red light, her hands float at the ends of rustling red silk sleeves, pale and bright against the carmine draperies behind her. She produces a Chinese fan and waves it, her other hand splayed in the air above it, and butterflies gush up between her fingers from behind the fan, fluttering up to the ceiling, to fall again as scarlet rose petals. White face with pointed vermillion lips, and two thin streaks to elongate her eyes, and black hair, pinned up, fine strands aloft around her head, and a red silk dress and trousers with embroidered flowers, black slippers skimming her across the stage like skipping stones. She has an eager following and many admirers because she is so beautiful.

Expectantly brief applause. She bows, curving to one side facing forward, her white face level and placid like a mask. Clapping once, with authority, she turns around, her long fingers pulling invisible lines in the air, bees spin off from her palms and dance around the stage. One by one they zip through the hoop of her looped thumb and forefinger, turning as they do so into fireflies that dance back and forth across the stage, and as they pass through her fingers again they turn to stone, polished and gleaming with the same green firefly light. These tiny beacons drift out above the audience, hovering in neat rows above upraised heads, until each spectator has his own companion. She draws her sword and chops the air—the shining chrysolites break and shower down on the people, evaporating at a touch with a sensation like the brush of new leaves, and the theatewr fills with the scent of orange flowers. Gasps of pleasure, the applause is more warm than strident.

She whistles, and a small troupe of cats file onto the stage, rolling glass balls before them with their forepaws. While obedient to her commands, these cats are obviously enjoying themselves. Christine gestures to the audience—the cats grip the balls and leap down into the aisles with them. She gestures to the audience—the cats, without needing to see what she

does, roll the balls up the aisles, leaving them in a row in the middle of each aisle. Swiftly the cats vanish through the curtained doors of the theater. Christine, who all this time has been making a quiet singing sound in her throat, opens her mouth and emits a soaring, pure tone—the glasses break and send plumes of fire into the air, plumes that rise and spin like pinwheels and then burst in clouds of coruscating pollen. The curtain has already fallen.

After a moment of silence, applause, the audience files out talking. The theater is empty. Christine is still standing in the middle of the stage, looking at the back of the curtain, eyes with pin-strut umbrella irises.

Her face goes wan blue and her body turns to vapor and condenses solid again with the distant beating of her heart. Her staring, golden eyes fix in space. She shuts them, and when she opens them again, she is on the street walking, as she does every night, down the streets of San Veneficio. She haunts the little plazas and open spaces and the crowded busy thoroughfares with the glowing white plaster of the tiny coffee shops, and the battered white wrought-iron chairs and tables, the white cotton shirts and pants on bronze and tan skin, glowing in the fading daylight and the waxing platinum beams of the streetlights. She passes through a city that rises around her like an architectural forest, hung with lazily flapping white muslin sheets that are film screens on which the people and the city are projected, rolling and swaying with the shifting of the sheets. They split to let her pass, one after another, and the thin cellophane tails of frayed cloth stroke her face as she goes by with a touch as light as a bubble, dewing her face with their faces and bodies. The brown-red and yellow-orange gold of the sunset and the lights of the streets and shops and the reflections, all mingle into an image of her face, her body moving forward, like the intangible wall of a bubble, an extension of her image cast in mingled light and color, and she occupies this image from moment to moment, stepping up to press herself into it, like putting on a mask, with the sensation of tiny electrical shocks criss-crossing her in waves, or the icy-hot sensation of a bubble bursting on the skin. Every moment it is renewed, every moment she steps forward to occupy it, and her ghost or her angel walks beside her and whispers to her, the gentle brush of her own lips on her own ear. Everything reacts to her, people, buildings, sky and ground, like reactants to an acid they come open and dissolve, and she completes them with her presence, arcing out from her in curved panes like wings or the tail of her shawl.

Christine scans the crowds, and from their heavily flapping screens they watch her pass with flickering projected attention and a silent-movie indicator closing her in a circle. They look to see who she is looking for, as she searches one street to the next, finding no one. The same sinister, dreaming face, the same glinting gaze of shadowed eyes, the same impersonal, vatic presence, like a somnambulist, a sleep-talker, filled with secrets she urgently wants to discover. As always, he is never quite there, although everything invokes him. He would not approach her from the dusty projector beam, but out of the lightless expanse of the theater itself, where she is, although lost for a time in the endless kaleiding attractions of San Veneficio in desert sunset, the imaginary stars, the odor of partial phantoms. He would emerge from the source of all these things, and also from the darkness on which they are projected. He would emerge, but he hasn't. Christine continues to patrol the streets at every sunset just as the exquisite portrait must always rise to occupy its frame, to meet or evade the viewer's gaze.

The bargain was struck some time ago, in a dream. There were ten strange, real dreams. The first night, she dreamt she was a child again. She saw her mother, who has been dead for many years. Christine, barely taller than the ornate doorknob she turns with both hands, makes her way into her mother's bedroom. The room is a silhouette against the sunset sky, which shines through two gaunt French windows; the walls are invisible. Her mother sits before the mirror on the opposite wall, her face lit by the reflected light of the sunset and two miniature lamps on the table before her.

Christine's mother is in her dressing gown, pale and long as a stalk of celery, cool and fresh and Junoesque, beautiful still, though she hadn't long to live. Christine remembers standing by the generous curve of her thigh under her long red gown, looking up at her long-lashed face. Her mother was a stage magician and her room was filled with props—they had all been stage magicians, her family and a whole covey of other women as well. Christine was to be her successor—she would follow her mother's ivory hands and imbibe the lesson in red tea from hibiscus petals—and she would replace them all in the future. Christine was the only child any of them had ever had, and they placed all their hopes in her.

Christine understands all these things right away, as one does in dreams, but the words her mother speaks to her are never fully intelligible. Something like this encounter in her mother's bedroom takes place in

dream after dream for many nights, and in each dream the words become a little clearer, the room a little darker, the hour outside the windows later and later. This is not a past moment revisited, this is a present moment—her mother is dead and has been making arrangements. A far better knowledge and a far better power than she or any of her colleagues or ancestors had ever had was somehow being offered to her for a service. Some part of that knowledge, an essential initial clue only, but more than she could ever have discovered on her own, and which would surely lead to a better magic.

Her mother had pulled out a developing pan filled with red, and the lights in the room flicked red, and she slid a paper in the pan and held out her hand to Christine. Christine felt her mother take her hand, and a sting as her mother pricked her finger and squeezed a drop of blood into the red, pressed her hand down into the red.

“Yes, it must hurt, I’m afraid,” her mother said, swirling the tray.

Slowly a picture appears on the paper. Christine’s mother pulled it out quickly and looked at it, then showed it to her. An irregular, dark figure peered out at her.

“He will teach you. The training must hurt, I’m afraid.”

And on another, later night, when the sky outside the windows was indigo and black, her mother, sitting in a tall golden bathtub with a turban binding up her heavy hair, said, “I will find him for you.”

Dimly, Christine saw her mother talking with someone, a dark and ominous figure at the end of the paved walk outside their house. She stood on one side of the fence, and he on the other. This was the figure in the picture, too dark to see. Her mother pulled something from her pocket—although she was too far away, watching from an upper-story window, to see what it was, Christine knows what it is: a picture of her. Reaching across the fence, the phantom places a bright red book in her hand.

The last night was the tenth; she stood at the fence, no longer a child but fully grown. Her mother is dead, Christine lives in the house with her father. It is dark, crickets are chirping, and this is odd because she doesn’t normally hear such incidental sounds in her dreams. She stands at the fence, where the light cast by the porch lamp grows weak—and suddenly he is there, as though sprung from the earth. She sees his appalling face, looks at his eyes, and at once knows entirely what she is being asked to do, and what she stands to gain. He warns her of the danger, and then asks. With a cold flash she agrees, bracing herself against any violent transformation to

follow, but everything is the same. Still he is standing before her, on the other side of the fence. Speaking strange words, he instructs her to wait for his signal to act. For him and for this signal she searches in these nightly excursions.

When she fails again to find him, she always returns home. She walks between the trees and feels their cool, moist breath hazing the frictionless air of morning, their boughs wave and fan her in passing like royal attendants. She glides over the steps to the porch and bobs noiselessly through the front door. In the left-front room, wide open beside her, her father used to sit in the center of the room, used to watch the sun rise, the window's projected rectangle of light inching up his cotton shirt, illuminating his vacant, placid face. She would change her red dress for one of Quaker gray, and lightly step into the room, to stand behind his chair. He was schizophrenic. Forever in the same chair watching the same sun rise over the horizon, the identical rays playing over his same features and body with the same intensity, warming at the same rate. Time bends and resutures itself to loop this moment outside of time, for him. To her, he is not a person anymore. He became calm, indifferent, and open, like the trees and the grass, the ground beneath and the sky overhead, and like the sun also. He radiated ocean-deep calm. Christine liked to settle her weight on the chair's arm and rest her head on her father's chest, to be included in his vast, vacant calm. It wasn't ocean-deep. It was shallow. Everything beyond a shallow depth vanished without trace or memory, and when she was like this, all but the moment and the attendant sensibility were occluded, endowing her with new vitality and incredible strength, refreshing her like a full night's sleep. Presently, as the sun-window would pass to the wall behind him, she would raise her head and go upstairs to sleep.

She would rise upright in her bed the moment night began to fall. As the sun sets, it reflects into her room, multiplying its gleams on the cut-glass beads that fringe the ceiling lamp, and lighting constellations of hanging glass ornaments, spangling the wallpaper with fading pumpkin-orange diamonds, but she remains asleep until it has set, and twilight turns everything to blue. The setting sun dapples her face smoky orange through her windows, but she doesn't wake up until twilight limns her face in pale fluorescent blue, like a patch of sky in the midst of high-piled cloud-white cushions and fog-white linen. Then her eyes snap open and she bolts upright like a jack-in-the-box.

She throws the sheets into the air and in a rustling flurry of flying cloth she rises to her feet, now in the center of a small hurricane of cloth, and in a moment the sheets settle again as silent and calm as a slow page turning, the words passed into forgetful darkness again. As they drop past her, she emerges fully dressed in gray, watching the bed fall into place as if she'd only just come in, hadn't slept at all, was ready to undress and retire—the Magician. Outside it's getting cold and dark, but she doesn't turn the lights on right away. Instead she sits on the settee by her bed and looks around her, at the walls. In a moment, they light by themselves, the color of light under deep water, rolling in synchronous waves across the walls, timed to her slow heart beating. A few hours to kill before the show begins, her father has been dead for several years now, she has nothing to do and no one to look after, empty hours of waiting strung out behind her in endless reels of unspooling film of action taken and repeated and modified in infinite recordings.

Although she cultivates regular habits this next element is always introduced outside of any pattern. She opens the drawer of her nightstand and withdraws a doll, roughly eight or nine inches tall. It is a man, wrapped in a thick coat of black cloth. His face is pale, mutable, familiar, and indistinct like faces in old photographs. She looks at it from time to time and to her it looks like an old memory—air rustles in the trees playing cool air over her bare arms and legs as she hides savagely in the bushes, tracing her glances between a pack of kids on the far side of the park and on the picnic tables, and she tries to catch the particular smell of sandwiches warmed by the sun and exhaling the stored breath of a dozen different kitchens, or the smell of upholstery, lying very still in the back of her father's car, hiding again, and watching in mute delight the faces of her friends passing by the windows again and again, rolling by with the sun glaring off their hair and faces as they squint and turn their heads searching, and all the while she's inches away, inside the car. She waits for them to come back, suddenly desperately hoping they'll come back and discover her this time. But the face that appears above her, framed in the window of the car, and dark with the shadow that falls over its features as it leans forward to peer into her eyes, is one she has never seen while awake.

Christine looks up into its eyes and says, "I understand." She wakes up, her eyes already open, staring out the window at clouds in the night sky.

At the morgue there are steel tables and cold air, bodies covered with sleek white draperies, and Christine is there, too. Unerringly, she threads her way among the tables to the center and spins slowly in place, her wide skirts flaring across the floor. Then she moves from spot to spot, lifting sheets, exposing blue faces. Here, a young woman, her age, with black hair. Flick of her fingers in the air, the woman's eyes open—the same color as hers. Roughly the same height and weight, the livid purple stripe across her throat: she had been throttled to death. Quickly, Christine draws the sheet over her again, bundling it underneath her with swift, businesslike motions, until she is completely wrapped. Then she draws a large brass hoop from beneath her skirts and, holding it in one hand, she waves the other, palm down, back and forth above the body, as if caressing it in the air. Her face hovers over her gliding hand, tight and intent, pushing out through her opaque eyes. The corpse rises a few inches off the table, still tightly wrapped in its sheet. Moving only her arm, the rest of her rigid as a statue, she passes the hoop along the body, right through, stopping just at the waist. Then she pulls the hoop slightly toward her, experimenting, and the body moves with it, remaining perfectly stable in the center of the hoop. She pulls it gently off the table, pulling it easily across the room with small tugs, as if coaxing it to drift across a pool. She pauses only to pluck a scalpel from a tray.

She checks the street outside with two craning twists of her head. Then she pulls the body out with her and right into the coach, a spectral white figure glowing faintly like a filament in the dark interior of the coach. Without a word, Christine taps the ceiling, and the carriage instantly jerks into motion, sweep ing silently down the street, with no driver.

She disembarks onto her front porch to a sussurrus of evening wind across her back. Easily she brings the body inside, dismissing the carriage around to the back of the house. Now she is working quickly, heading upstairs first, angling the corpse up the stairs behind her, grasping the top of the loop. She gets it into her bedroom and withdraws the hoop, letting the body settle onto her bed. Immediately she strips the sheet off and begins dressing it in her clothes, working hastily, but she is thorough, taking the time to collect its hair properly, trim the nails and buff them, the file rasping against the silence of the room. When she is done, the body looks like her. Now the hoop again, and downstairs to the back room. There she lays the body on a high table, flicking on a dangling, hooded lightbulb. Gently, she

turns the face to one side, and taking the scalpel, she starts to cut the face, carving deep gashes in the bloodless, soft flesh, like cutting clay, it falls away in even straight edges, and all the while that face gazing up, smiling at her with the blissful, rapt look of a nursing child, up at her own face—still intent, forcing its way out through her eyes. She cuts the face until it is no longer recognizable, not anybody's face. She checks the teeth, and pulls out the ones with fillings with a pair of pliers. Then she fetches her fountain pen. With a few deft strokes, she draws a silver-headed cane on the skin behind one of the ears—a sign, as instructed. When the ink dries, she is finished.

She takes the nail parings, the teeth, bits of hair and flesh and bundles them neatly into a cloth with the scalpel and the pliers. Then she drops the bundle into a wooden case she uses in her magic act, closes the lid, and taps it once with a black wooden wand. When she opens the box again, the bundle is gone. Satisfied, she carries the corpse into the front-left room and arranges it carefully on the floor.

It lies there now, staring straight up, absolutely still, its ruined face still placid, radiating ocean-deep calm.

The courtyard is lined with pillared Greek facades and broken paving stones scattered at the periphery over the dirt. There is a large oak tree in the center of the yard, its spoon-shaped leaves fluttering in the wind high in its boughs. In the shade of the tree and to one side is a rough wooden park table made of dry gray wood, bristling with splinters like a porcupine. She can make out the secretary sitting in the dim, yellow light of two old storm lanterns, glass chimneys cataracted with a layer of milky grime. At first, the secretary's mousy-blonde hair, piled up on her head and just barely reflecting the light of the lanterns, is the only thing visible underneath the tree, but then the rest of her emerges as Christine draws nearer. Then, suddenly, she seems to snap into focus, carefully toting up accounts in a thick ledger, writing briskly in a neat flowing hand so fluid and graceful that simply watching her fingers flicking the pen back and forth is a pleasure. Christine has the impression that there are other people lurking about in the shadows, possibly a line standing in the shadows by the opposite wall. Ignoring them, she approaches the table, the wind rustling overhead like the hiss of silk cloth.

The secretary looks up at her and nods once, primly. She puts the pen back in her inkwell and closes the ledger, leaving it shut on the table. With a

quick finger to her lips, she leads Christine out past the rear wall, pointing her down an alley to an open door with a dark frame in the center of the right-hand partition. Then, with the same darkly mysterious air of exaggerated scruple, she withdraws.

Within the doorway is a small room, not ten feet square. There is a single fluorescent high overhead, a pay phone on one wall marred with graffiti, and an extremely large confessional against the opposite wall, to her right. The door to the left-hand side is closed and latched, but the right-hand door is slightly ajar, not quite clearing the jamb. Christine steps inside, her small boots thudding muffled on the wooden floor, and draws the cabinet shut behind her, latching it with a small iron hook. She sits. The door in the partition falls slowly open away from her, silently. Within, she can just make out a few spangles of light from the outside, spattering the interior in the other compartment, where they fall on a fold of a white shirt, or a single white cheek—perhaps the gleam of a fixed eye.

She whispers, and her words stream through the door like a gust of snow. She explains everything, perched by the door like a bird on a windowsill, and waits.

A pale, white hand floats up through the opening out of a black frame, holding a small vial of blue liquid between thumb and forefinger. Gingerly she accepts the vial, and the hand snaps back again, the door slams shut. She pauses only a moment, then puts the vial away and leaves the cabinet, slipping out and down the alley, invisibly, into the city.

The sweep of her broad gray skirt and a blur of windows and streetlights passing to a rusting iron lattice crowning a tall, polished, bottle-green building. Wisps of hair are blown around her face as she looks compulsively down at the foundations, obscured by straight-edged shadows from the surrounding rooftops. In the light from below, her face stands out white and tapering in relief against her dark clothes. The light catches in her brimming eyes, reflecting sharp and clear around irises that grow hard and dense, staring down at the fall.

She pulls out the vial and drinks. The instant the thick fluid drains into her mouth she is disoriented and her knees buckle—she reaches for a crumbling metal beam to keep from toppling forward, and already her hand is miles away from her, her body is coming apart, her limbs go warm and numb, expanding away from her, going to sleep, sensation reduced to unconscious whispering diffused by great distance. Suddenly, she realizes

she's leaning out too far and somehow pulls herself back, but a moment later her equilibrium shifts and she leans over the edge again. She's becoming a dummy, extremities connected by flimsy wires, dead weights. She wants to drop the burden of her heavy body onto the infinitely yielding air below. She jerks her arm and her body pulls back. Now her torso is vanishing, disappearing in a spreading cloud of warmth, her neck starts to droop. Her eyes feel cold, fixed. Then she leans out again, and the weight of her body pulls her distant fingers free. She falls, passing through a shaft of moonlight on her way to the ground, conscious enough to be thankful to see it once more. Her arms are blown up in a ballerina's halo around her head, her legs bend also with the skirts billowing among them. Then she is absorbed by the shadows below. She approaches the ground like a transparent object brushing a transparent surface, hanging a moment impossible to see, and then, ghostlike, she passes through the ground and disappears . . .

THE GOLEM

Black clouds gather among San Veneficio's minarets and boil down low, rumbling and flooding the city with their clammy breath scented with rain. Quickly, precisely, and with a minimum of faltering, the Divinity Student makes the last few modifications to his construction machine and reviews the condition of the surrogate body parts. In the meantime Teo checks the electrical connections, nodding sagaciously over his tools. Then, the Divinity Student calls him over, and together they load the machine with exact reproductions of the Divinity Student's clothes and shoes, and with a reproduction leg brace in two halves, one of which is outfitted with a miniature receiver, tuned to a transmitter in the Divinity Student's brace, and a small scroll. The gelatin culture that Teo took from the Divinity Student earlier has thrived in solution to a volume of several gallons; this is loaded into a special pump. The Divinity Student sits by the instrument panel, watching Teo load a magazine with pages of the Divinity Student's writing, all in Catalog-words, in Catalog-grammar, clamping them in place against a metal panel inside a machine resembling a film projector. Outside, rain begins to fall.

The Divinity Student looks down. His right hand is covered with ants, scurrying among his fingers, biting and carrying tiny crumbs of flesh away in their mandibles. He does not feel them. He imagines for a moment dissolving into so many fragments to be carried away by legions of mechanical ants. Then Teo is beside him, brushing the ants away with an outraged expression on his face, a doubled-up towel in his hand. The Divinity Student gives him a long, penetrating look. Then he glances up; he is directly below the ring of apparatus in the observation dome. The rods protrude from their circular frame like the feathery threads of a pin-strut umbrella iris around an empty pupil, staring down vacantly at him.

Teo backs away to a safe distance as the Divinity Student starts throwing switches on the instrument panel, setting the construction machine to work. Teo in a corner, the Divinity Student at the base of the tower, and the machine.

A torso swings into view on a platform, lungs and a heart are installed, held in place by one pair of arms while several others, smaller praying-mantis arms, tipped with spinnerets, snake around into the body cavity on tiny hinges, busily suturing veins and arteries, organs into place. The arms retract and another pair installs the diaphragm with staples, and then the Divinity Student's pages are stuffed in and the abdomen sewn shut over them, a pair of pincers holds the muscle together in a small upraised ridge while a spinneret travels down and sews the two halves together, its needle buzzing violently. While this is going on the legs and arms appear, dripping with formaldehyde from the tanks, and are held precisely up to the joints and sutured in place by a many-headed suturing array, dozens of tiny, whirring accelerating sewing heads flashing up and down with the deliberate motion exclusively characteristic of living things.

Above and to the left of the platform, which rotates back and forth as needed, tiny struts rework and rewire the jaws, the skull gaping in midair as the teeth are repositioned, pulled, inserted, filed down. Miniature files and sanders grind puffs of powdered bone from the cheek and jawline, and around the eyesockets, while the top is sawn off and lined with tissue paper. The individual muscles are bolted on with artificial ligaments and steel welds. Meanwhile the brain is prepared for insertion—threadlike probes sink in and out of its folds like hummingbird beaks, delivering minute pulses of current to keep the neurons active, playing over the entire brain as it hangs suspended from beneath, swung into position above the skull. Then the arms lower it down slowly into the skull, the eyes—dangling deflated from the optic nerves like shrivelled prunes—are tugged forward into the sockets, then reinflated with vitreous humor when in position. Meanwhile, whip-arms the gage of wire hangers work feverishly around the brain, soldering connections, hand-over-hand clamps opening and closing, threading the spine down through a small tail of vertebrae—the skullcap claps down and is welded in place and a hood of skin, attached to the throat, is pulled up and over from behind, the face appears, stretched on a metal ring, and is pulled taut across the muscles and sutured beneath the chin, hair is tweezed into the scalp and eyebrows and eyelashes strand by strand by tiny repeaters. Flashes of lightning flicker through the windows, skip across the floor.

Now the head, a perfect likeness, is lowered and joined to the body, the spinnerets sewing crazily, the surgical silk singing through the runners. The

Divinity Student watches the body assemble itself dreamily, nodding back and forth on his stool, in a trance. The head is attached, the body is complete. Thicker needles puncture the skin and pump the veins and arteries full of the Divinity Student's gelatin culture, the body becomes less flaccid-looking. Then strips of cloth, sleeves, buttons, the soles and tops of the shoes are brought together around the body and sewn together—the body is fully dressed. It bobs and weaves back and forth, lowered and raised from one station in the machine to another with smooth mechanical regularity trailing flutters of winding and unwinding synchronized systems. Finally, the right leg is lifted and the two halves of the brace clap shut around it and are spot-welded in place with loud raucous buzzes and little plumes of smoke. The leg is lowered smoothly. The body is ready. For a moment the Divinity Student waits, his face uplifted, the transmitter in his brace winks on, the receiver in the Golem's brace winks on.

Then a blast of lightning strikes current up a wire like a neon tube—the iris of rods in the apparatus over the Divinity Student's head extends downward—with the speed of striking snakes the tips of the rods jab into his arms and legs and shoot down between his vertebrae to run the length of his spine from the inside, and up into his brain, spreading fingers of wire through every part of him—the rods retract with equal suddenness, taking him with them; he sails passively up through the air as if he were falling into the pupil of that eye overhead, to be fixed suspended in the center of that pupil, the rods radiating out from him like a metal web, his body hanging in space, turning upward toward the sky . . . simultaneously, a curved glass lid has already dropped out of the gloom over the machine, down over the body on the platform, and a pair of curved glass sections swerve up from underneath, and all come together to form an ellipsoidal glass enclosure around the body, like a clear egg. The hiss of gas as halogen and argon and supercooled formaldehyde vapor isotopes come flooding in, invisible, rustling through the body's hair and clothes, and the lights over the platform go out, leaving it in darkness; the machine is cringing back into itself.

Another blast stabs down out of the clouds and the wires snap against the floor like whips, tiny lights wink on around the Divinity Student in his ring of support rods, and the connected machines start to take measurements and administer medications and chemicals, small doses of current—below, the chamber flickers searing white and inside the alembic

Teo can see the body intermittently frozen in convulsions, and more lightning arcing down, the body is jerking and reeling in an egg of white-blue light fed by glass coils candescing under the platform as more wires flare and crackle, throwing curves rigidly, streaming smoke from burning insulation, lightning again and again and the body jackknifes in angular twists like the wires, clattering against the inside of the enclosure. Then the glass lid rises, the two segments beneath drop away. The gas inside turns blue and opaque when it comes into contact with the outside air. The Golem swings both legs together over the edge of the table, pivoting on his hip, and pushes off as he comes upright to land on his feet, standing, white vapor oozing from his clothes and steaming body. Without hesitating, he marches to the door, loping firmly on his broken leg, enormous discharges of static flaring from his brace as he walks, like camera flashes popping in the air around him—he steps outside. And in the tower, sighing, the Divinity Student is rolling over as the dome slides open above him, sparking flashes of static electricity like miniature sheet lightning. Outside, the Golem stands in the street and looks up at the clouds, feeling the rain pouring down over his head, his glasses, rilling in refreshing sheets down his face and across his heavy coat, cool trickling streams across his burning temples and in his charred eyes. The clouds come down within twenty feet of the street and seethe directly overhead, as if on his convection. Inside, the Divinity Student stares up into a limitless expanse of frigid blackness and tiny stars glittering like puny flashes of lightning. In them he sees a thousand years from now San Veneficio buried by volcanic ash, and the new citizens of the new city walk past the observation dome protruding from the ground, a hemisphere of thick glass filled with formaldehyde, and the Divinity Student is still there, barely visible, far below in the murky depth of the tower, resting on his bed of untarnished metal rods, his flesh bleached colorless, white, and shriveled by the preservative, his skin folded and seamed, clothes and hair drained of color hang motionless around him. Every few hours, his sunken eyes twitch in their sockets, following the movements of the hazy, tea-colored shadows undulating over the surface of the dome, across miles and miles, from the city beneath the city. The moon, a visible other world, lifting him past the ground, pulling him up with it as it rises, lowering him as it sinks. Far below in a welter of confused double impressions below and behind him, Teo's last goodbye gutters out.

The cold air washes over his face like alcohol, interrupted by warm shafts of dawning copper-colored sunlight up the tree-lined, unpaved drive to the house. The Golem is walking on his own, still leaning heavily on his brace, and waving his cane in a slow arc in front of him. It has a curved silver handle, and the shaft is thin and painted black, ending in a long diagonal fracture where the tip is broken off. Steam still spills in tiny threads from his face; more from between his eyelashes—the sunlight is so brilliant it blocks out sound. He moves as if he were under deep water, his blank eyes fixed on the small gabled house with peaked roof and peeling white paint. As he looks up, the features of his face begin again to cohere, resolving into an expression of mute, unsettled anticipation. To his right, beyond the trees, is a wide lot with dewy grass growing in thick clumps, in a smell of wet dirt. To the other side are a row of charred-black houses with their backs turned. His path is a minor deviation from the main road where these brick houses huddle. He has come to find a woman named Christine Dalman, she was promised to him in marriage a long time ago. He had been only a boy then, and had not yet run off to the Seminary. Now however he knows he must find this woman, and keep an ancient promise—in his memory he sees his mother talking with a dark man on the other side of the fence, he sees the bargain being struck, he somehow receives her name, her image. Gleaming skin and eyes, gleaming lips, shining teeth, shining hair. Wrecked as he is, he must keep this long-deferred appointment, and determine what is to be done. He knows the Divinity Student made him for this purpose.

The Golem's movements are random and unconscious, but chemically vigorous; his nerves fire through numb dead limbs, but as he steps up to the porch, he experiences a feeling—a strangled, plaintive sensation ignites in his chest and steams up into his throat, leaves his head smoldering. This place is familiar. He's feeling waves of weird nostalgia and dread. Turning around the rim of the hedge he sees the two detectives, their names warble in his head from unfamiliar memories, recorded through distorted senses—Pracke and Kipe.

They start when they see him: he knows they recognize him, and see that he has changed. Instantly, they turn and disappear into the house with the air of bearing urgent news. The Golem steps heavily onto the porch, and through the swinging front door.

There's a hallway directly before him, with a narrow staircase to one side and doors to the right and left; police inspectors are scurrying all throughout the house. The door at the end of the hall is open, framing, perfectly, the Prefect of Police, reclining with crossed legs in a leather armchair, in the room beyond. The Golem accelerates down the hall, drawn toward the Prefect as if he were at the end of a string looped around the Prefect's little finger. The door looms wide and swallows him; Pracke and Kipe are standing in the corner their faces blank with stupid astonishment.

The Prefect of Police, his name is Griepentrog, is sitting directly across the little room from the door. Behind him, the rising sun strikes the heavy curtains, and they glow the color of a honeycomb, illuminating him with a soft, caressing glow. He is dressed in a spotless, pressed white suit with a high starched collar, his legs crossed across the knee exposing a long thin ankle in a gray stocking. Looking up at them, his face is the color and texture of yellowed newspaper; his hands are small, soft, and pink, like a baby's, with gleaming, manicured fingernails. He grips a long white cigarette at a crisp angle next to his face. It oozes a heavy blue smoke that rises like slow-moving air bubbles in deep water, a line of smoke like a strand of resin depending from the cool shadows of the ceiling. He takes a languid sip from the cigarette, drawing the last thread of smoke between his parted lips with a small circling motion of his pointed red tongue. His thin eyelids hang low over his amber-colored eyes, floating in limpid orange jelly from the cigarettes. When he exhales, the smoke trickles from his nostrils into the curling edge of his nose, eddying in the pits on either side; then the two tributaries of smoke stream up through his eyebrows and fan out in a thin, barely visible membrane over his broad, impressive forehead, nestling in his thick gelatinous hair. His hair is the color of powdered charcoal dusted with lead, and spreads from his temples like the head of a mushroom. He gazes at them with catlike contentment on his girlish face, his pursed lips framed by two small moustaches, like crossed brooms, above, and a comma of beard below. Out of his happy perfection, he welcomes them with an inclination of his head.

“Well, hel-lo!” he says, another dream come true. “Have you come to help us with our investigation?”

The Golem jerks the corners of his mouth up and drops his lower lip, returning the Prefect's false smile.

“Yes!” says the Golem in a clotted voice.

The Prefect grins wider. “Good! We could certainly use someone like you!”

The Golem’s face is flushed and hot. The acid, unnatural body odor that emanates from beneath his coat is filling the room, deadening the florid aroma of the Prefect’s cigarette. A cavity of sick dread is opening up in him —the emotion is *his* and nightmarishly painful—sucking at his quickening sense of expectation, his face is turning bright red radiating palpable waves of heat that rustle across Pracke’s face and Kipe’s face like a cloud of flies, his odor getting chokingly strong, and the Prefect is still smiling and calm, with his spotless suit, and his eyes slitted in satisfied crescents in his papery face. The two detectives shuffle back into the doorway, trying to draw clean air from the hall and the drafty wakes of the other inspectors as they stream from room to room to room behind them. For a moment there is no sound except for the rhythmic thud of their footsteps all throughout the house. Then the Prefect speaks again, in the inflections of a playschool teacher.

“Would you like to work with the Police?”

The Golem nods erratically, his hideous grin widens in his red face.
“Yes!”

“Fine. Then why don’t you assist the detectives here. When you’re finished looking at the house, Pracke and Kipe will take you to the station, where you can examine the records we already have.” He is speaking slowly and carefully. “This case has been very difficult for us,” he puts his hand to his chest to indicate *us*, “and you have talents that we need very badly. It makes me very happy to know you have decided to accept our invitation.”

Griepentrog pulls a photograph from his jacket with long skinny fingers, and holds it up.

“This is the victim.”

The Golem looks at the picture. It’s like watching a ghost appear in a column of white smoke, thin tendrils of black smoke writhing up from the embers and twisting into the sharp M of a mouth, the curling nose and nostrils, the black pits of the eyes with glowing whites and dark iris. He stares at the image and inside he collapses, and throbbing like a terrified heart, dislocating and fragmenting into shards of nameless sensations —“Where is she?” he asks in a shrill voice and trembling hands outstretched. He’s recognized her—this is a memory that was driven out of

him completely, shocked out of him, and it has returned now for the first time, somehow he knows this.

“Her body was found in the parlor, the left-front room from here,” the Prefect says, and the Golem turns and bolts down the hall throwing open the door, and he falls forward into the emptiness of the room as if it were a pit, as if he were stepping down onto a step that unexpectedly wasn’t there, snipped out, tragic all-aborted future, a dead end—wan wallpaper, iridescent white drapes and a wide view of the trees and the walk beyond the porch, simple furniture against the walls, a single chair slouching in the center of the room, and the air full of the grimy haze of abandoned lost empty murder houses and protoplasm of blank crime photographs, and as he looks around muddy tears overflow his eyes and run thickly down his convulsed face, crying incoherently he stumbles around the room clutching at furniture, drapes, dragging his palms over the walls and carpet in torture of successive blasts of loss, “where is she” appears ghost-written on the wall soldered with absence crashing over him like heavy waves that pin down the drowning only inches from the surface, and he runs from the room, and up the stairs, and from room to room, and everywhere, the same absence, the same void of blazing light and drifting dust churned by detectives tweezing evidence into plastic bags and with his mouth wide open, “Where is she? Where is she?” wracks out of him in putrid sobs. It’s as if he were a child, coming home from school and finding his house stripped bare to the four walls and his parents vanished, suddenly nowhere with nothing and no life, no future, no care nor anyone left, not even the child who crosses the threshold into the vacant house and fades away into an odor of damp roots chewing wet dirt, the Golem, from room to room in the tiny house, weakly tearing the air with his hands and voice, and returning again and again to the front-left room until he stands turning in the center, and he falls to the ground, arcing a moment from the ceiling to the floor, and pressure enough to burst his eyes explodes him, like a string of firecrackers down his spine, throwing him to the ground and hammering at his head—his limbs go light and jerking wildly he tips backward, slammed down by a blazing sheet of light and then another and another, they strobe, he collapses, strob ing on the corners, flood of dead pieces hurtling away leaving nothing behind, frothing at the mouth and bashing the floor with his brace. The furniture in the room all flies into the center and collides in midair above him, clatters down on top of him. Pracke and Kipe

run in and pull the tables and chairs off and drag him out of the house, his limbs locked, his eyes gone white, foam on his lips, torn face red, burning, unrecognizable. Slabs of oblivion scissor his ribcage shut like the door of a tomb, all the weight of a sterile future slamming shut and squeezing him out —a single dark edge sharp as a razor, as the borders of your vision, squeezing down to compress him into a single point of endless repetition, and wink out like a dead star, drained and disappeared, leaving a perfect void. Pracke and Kipe pull him clattering over the boards of the porch and down the steps, he lands in a stone gutter, thrashing in the water. After a moment he seizes up, petrified. The same sense in slightly different words spills out on a paper tape—She's not there, not waiting for him, nowhere, dead, not there, not waiting for him, nowhere, dead. Nowhere, not anywhere—she was his intended, you see, his future world, his only life, a memory brought back to him as a weapon turned against him, a photograph he was given by his mother or father or by someone, “this is your fian-cée”, the promise he'd made before he'd ever entered the Seminary, the whole of his future life afterward, everything founded on that exquisite clockwork face that would be his face, the only meaningful promise, every trace of it had died out of him, while her face hadn't changed, had grown only more painful to see. Pracke looks at Kipe.

“Perhaps you should brief him now,” Kipe says. “It's as good a time as any.”

Pracke licks his lips, takes a deep breath, and begins, shouting his words at the smashed meat of the Golem's melted face: “The victim Christine Dalman was discovered dead apparent homicide at 4:15 PM by the postman the victim lived alone and has no surviving relatives she worked at the Orpheum Theatre as a stage magician—”

At this time, the Prefect of Police Griepentrog is walking away down the lane, stretching his legs without pain. Behind him, trails of wafting photographs, police reports, affidavits, statements, appraisals, records, warrants, letters, court orders . . .

Magellan's secretary, crossing a small, boxy courtyard covered by a stone vault—

“Excuse me, miss.”

She turns, her feet grating on the cobbles echoes in the vault—a man's voice—a man in a cassock stands there just a few feet behind her.

Handsome, catlike face with creased cheeks, thick dark hair; he flashes brilliant white teeth and takes a step or two toward her.

Wary of this bland appearance, she fixes him with her powerful green eyes. "Well?"

"I'm an officer of the Seminary—my name is Dulem."

"... Charmed."

He is now a few steps away—he stops, still basting her with warm reassuring rays from his gleaming teeth and athletic tan.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to try to get you to say anything about Magellan," he spreads his hands in front of him, kind of laughing, all friendly personable bonhomie.

"Oh yes?"

"Actually, we're interested in a former agent of ours—you might have known him?" Keeping things diplomatically vague, there.

"Perhaps you should ask Magellan about him. I'm just a secretary."

"You know I can't—Magellan won't speak to us."

She shrugs, "He's my employer—if he won't speak to you, I don't see why you'd think I would. I could lose my job you know."

"There are more important things to you than your job."

Still smiling, he pulls a printed white card from between the gilt edges of his beautiful prayer book, and offers it to her. "I can tell you all about them—just call at this address."

She eyes the card a moment. The smiling man drops the card as her hand reaches out for it, allowing it to flutter to the ground—he turns with a brief laugh and walks away.

Teo was buying a newspaper—as he handed the man his coins he glanced up, and saw someone he recognized at the head of the street. The Golem is loping along painfully on his bad leg, his jaw clenched. He starts to pass by, then pauses and peers at Teo dubiously.

They stand in the street for a moment. The Golem nods at him ambiguously, and looks up at the sky—overhead, the ragged clouds are gray and purple, their undersides lit with vermillion streaks, and the horizon glows like a furnace. Teo is watching—the Golem looks different, scorched. For a moment he feels a sense of graduated relation to the Golem; both of them have changed in essentially identical ways. It throws him off his stride for a moment, and the Golem walks off, his shoulders rolling with his loping gait. His momentum pulls Teo after, and he takes a step, falling again

into place as he did before. He notices that the air around the Golem is rigid, a perfectly transparent envelope moving with him despite the hot, evanescent haze of his presence. Like the Divinity Student, the Golem has an air of rottenness about him, but without the Divinity Student's decrepitude—the Golem is vibrantly rotten. Like a lens, his rottenness magnifies and clarifies a narrow tunnel of vision around him, but its boundaries are almost invisible against the air. Teo takes his arm and leads him back to the morgue, a few blocks away.

As the daylight grows feebler the Golem walks more and more swiftly, with mounting assurance. The morgue comes into view just as the streetlights wink on, and the two of them scurry into the shadowy alleys, lined with modest lean-to kiosks selling shabby, inexpensive wreaths, black armbands of greasy fabric, darned secondhand veils, and other furnishings of mourning, that surround the morgue.

A heavy truck, with a canvas top, thunders down the narrow street rattling loudly over the potholes. Belching a cloud of exhaust and lacing the air in its wake with sickening traces of foul meat, a smell familiar enough to them both, the truck lurches crazily over the wildly uneven road and jerks its way around the corner. In the resounding silence it leaves behind it, the Golem rushes to one of the side doors of the morgue and raps the lock once with his cane. The lock clicks open and the two of them duck swiftly inside.

“Leave the light off,” the Golem rasps.

Teo stumbles behind the Golem, little more than a lurching patch of darker black against the lightless warehouse. He drags and scrapes across the tiles and nearly collides with a freezer. Awkwardly he paws the metal door and gestures to Teo to come up close, tapping the card on the front of the door. Teo moves in to read it: “Christine Dalman—d. 02/29 / 03/01.”

“The murdered woman?”

The Golem “humphs.”

The Golem slides his face down beside the door, peering through the dark, and claws open the latch, shearing the padlock's bar clean in two. He sweeps Teo aside and behind him with his arm as he pulls open the door and a tiny light comes on inside.

Staring with furious impatience into the compartment, the Golem hauls the steel drawer out to its full length and imperiously hurls the pall to the floor.

Leaning forward, the Golem props himself on the shelf and peers at the body. Its face is badly disfigured, long slashes running deep across the features. Teo regards the cuts professionally.

“Scalpel work,” he says.

The Golem is scanning her face and throat with birdlike jerks of his head, and then he reaches up gently and pulls her hair up away from her face, and, despite himself, he makes a little sound.

“There!” he says, tapping the spot behind her right ear with his fingertip.

Teo looks, and sees a small ink drawing on the skin. It’s a broken, black silver-handled cane.

“This isn’t her,” the Golem says, grinning horribly; and, when Teo doesn’t understand, “—*my fiancée*.” He points at the card on the door. “Christine Dalman.”

“This—” he taps the drawing again, smearing the ink, “—is a sign, meant for me. She’s still alive.” His face flushes and turns up in a languid crescent towards the ceiling as he stands up, settling himself standing upright, not hunched, eyes flashing. His fever dapples his face white, red, and green at the edges, the skin blazing hot as a furnace. He looks once at Teo, and then turns aside to go. Teo pauses a moment to look at the body.

Teo can’t believe he’s engaged.

“I knew she wasn’t dead,” the Golem says to the ceiling. “She mutilated her ‘own’ face,” he says, and his grin flickers once in the darkness as the freezer-door light blinks. “She did just as I uh just as *he* did.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know,” the Golem says, looking again at Teo. For a moment he puzzles over the question, and then a light flickers in his eyes and he taps his own neck behind the ear, “But now I know why he made me—only a double, like me, can follow her.”

Teo shakes his head, shrugs.

“She’s down there,” the Golem says, banging the ground a couple of times with his foot, “hiding, and doing research. You can’t go down there without a reason, and you can’t go down there in the ordinary way—you need a substitute, either above or below. She left hers above, he sends his below—that’s *me*.”

“Why would she hide? I mean from what?”

The Golem thinks—“You know Griepentrog don’t you?”

“Ugh.”

“Yes, ambitious in all the wrong ways. He wants knowledge of certain things.”

“Her research?”

“Whatever she learns. If he knows where she’s gone, (and I think he does,) he wouldn’t know how to follow, but he would certainly be waiting for her when she gets back.”

“He’s been watching her?”

“Of course. He’s not in his line of work to enforce *the law*.”

The Golem stoops painfully to retrieve the pall, and drapes it again over the body.

“A dream told him to dig me uh *him* up. He didn’t know why then, but he knows why now.”

“You’ll go after her, and he’ll follow?”

“He can’t—he’ll string me along, as the next best thing.”

The metal door snaps shut, the little light winks out inside.

As they turn away, Teo is struck by something—“Griepen trog is an agent of your old Seminary, isn’t he?”

He’s talking to the back of the Golem’s head, which nods twice. “I knew it the minute I clapped eyes on him—he’s got a diploma somewhere.”

Far from leading, Teo follows the Golem back to the circus grounds. He is still loping on his braced leg, but he’s taking longer strides, and the heat shimmers around him in the growing daylight in a halo of shuddering threads, his red-green face blanching blue-white in the twilight before dawn. One day, the chord that binds him will snap him back into the sun.

Now they’re back at Teo’s small house. Without waiting for the lights, the Golem lurches to a corner and collapses, clattering down into a sitting position with his braced leg sticking out in front of him. Then he sits still and is silent. His eyes are open, blank.

Immediately beneath that spot in the sky where the sun makes an orange X in the caverns of the clouds, in the weak and uncertain light of a phone box one can make out the face of Magellan’s secretary. She impatiently asks the operator at the exchange for the police.

GRIEPENTROG

The Golem is making his way to the cemetery—it's very important. The wall along which he is walking is very white, dazzling in the noonday sun—the muscles around his eyes are stiff with squinting, when he looks away from the wall, a pink haze hangs over everything. Through this pink haze he sees, standing on the corner by an idling car, the two detectives, Pracke and Kipe. Pracke nudges Kipe.

Kipe clears his throat several times, “You’ll have to come with us.”

“Now?”

Kipe nods.

“You see, I’m a busy man.”

Pracke raises his eyebrows. “What difference does that make?”

“Does it absolutely have to be now?”

Kipe nods, rumpling his face as if to say, “I wish it wasn’t so.”

Pracke says, “We are all at the mercy of our superiors.”

Pracke coughs. He coughs again, and clears his throat.

“ . . . Appointment time, big fella.”

He and Kipe walk swiftly, side by side, up to the Golem. With a peremptory heave they drag him up by his shoulders and pull him along to the door, his leg brace screeching on the slate pavings. They pitch the Golem into the backseat of their car. With an affected sigh, he gathers his complicated limbs together and just out of the way of the slamming door.

Police headquarters—the Golem shuffles inside, tiresome as ever. Powerful aura of futility, inertia. The walls are smooth, cool plaster with wide arches and bristling red crescent tiles, red cobblestones worn smooth as rocks under a riverbed. Detectives in light overcoats spill past, crisscrossing the buildings and grounds, giving him a wide berth. They keep him waiting for over an hour in a dingy, airless room the walls shellacked with thick glossy tan paint. The usual routine, trying to get him riled and impatient before meeting their superior.

Finally, he is admitted into Griepentrog’s office, and it is spacious as a barn with potted plants and ceiling fans. A phalanx of desks guards the

outer office, each one attended by a secretary in a simple white dress like a modified lab coat. Pracke's head pops out of the doorframe and swivels on his collar, inviting the Golem in.

The inner office is frozen in warm gelatinous orange light from glowing windowshades, drawn down against the direct rays of the sun. Pracke and Kipe stand before the massive oak desk, flanking a wooden chair with leather cushions riveted onto its frame. Griepentrog, gleaming like a marble statue, sits motionless behind his desk, steepling his fingers, silently cuing the Golem to sit. A cigarette sits poised at the rim of the ashtray like the barrel of a cannon, smoke laddering up past his face in a rolling, funnel-shaped stream. Griepentrog waits a few moments, permitting a heavy mantle of powerful silence to settle about his shoulders in a passive gesture, waiting for the fruits of machinations that, once set in place and motion, need no maintenance.

“Well, what have you got for me?” he asks, languidly transfixing the Golem with his oleaginous eyes.

The Golem's greenish face now contorts again into a repulsive false smile.

“You haven't been honest with me,” he says.

“In what way?”

“Why didn't you tell me you were watching her?”

“Why should we have told you that?”

“Why did you have her under surveillance?”

“It isn't important. You really ought to confine yourself to investigating her death.”

“You had three cars on her almost all the time.”

Griepentrog turns his chair slightly to one side, himself still as motionless as a statue. “I can only say that we felt it was necessary that we keep an eye on her for a while.”

“You know where she is, but you can't get to her.”

Griepentrog is silent.

“I can bring her to you,” the Golem says with a nauseating grin, redolent of steeping fever and the moist haze of general infection. His face looks fibrous and drawn, in places the skin is white and dead like a webbed membrane over his flushed cheeks and forehead.

Griepentrog also smiles, a slow, vertiginous, infectious smile, that spreads from his lips across the room to crease Pracke's and Kipe's features

as well, dreams coming true again like a golden boy can do no wrong. They are all smiling and their smiles get broader and broader and he flushes redder and redder as he explains his plan, and Griepentrog leans forward, his eyes on the Golem as he doodles a string of elegant loops of ink from a gold fountain pen, his smile still stretching, chiming into the room and coloring it deeper and deeper shades of orange. And as the Golem leaves, they watch his loping back through the closing door and glance at each other, smiling and nodding with an unspoken air of accomplishment, as if to say, “We finally brought him around.” The door shuts silently on their smiling nodding faces, and the secretaries sit and type without looking up as he passes.

As the Golem heads for the door, he engraves in his memory the image of Griepentrog’s smiling smiling nodding face, thinking all the time about the cars, the hounding, the chasing, the hectoring, of Christine, how far she ran to escape them—*they are capable of doing anything to her, to learn what she knows, or will know.*

He carries a sample of the Divinity Student’s tainted saliva in a gelatin envelope beneath his tongue. Pausing only for a moment, he lifts the ceramic lid of the water cooler by the door to the office and spits, dexterously squashing the gelatin bubble and ejecting its contents. (The envelope seals again the moment the pressure of the tongue is lifted: a skillful practitioner need never worry about self-contamination). The clear dollop of saliva dissolves instantly, infusing the entire volume of water in the tank.

Magellan’s secretary has the habit of eavesdropping on her employer, she is enterprising, she from time to time reads more of his documents than she is strictly speaking permitted to. She works at home, in her free time, and after a number of failed secret experiments, she mixes a preparation of paste, clear glue, pectin, and chemically very pure, very expensive wax in her bathtub. Stirred in hot water, the preparation gradually settles to the bottom of the tub; she skims the water into the sink with a bread pan.

Careful not to disturb it, she reaches down and feels the warm, doughy wax with the palm of her hand. Satisfied with its consistency, she seals the room, leaving only a small aperture, outfitted with a filter, in the window. Now, she lies on the floor, on her back, immediately alongside the tub, and recites from memory until she falls asleep. After her eyes have closed, and her breath has become shallow and slow, her voice continues to sound . . .

When she rises from the floor the next morning, her wax double rises from the bottom of the tub. Miss Woodwind stands facing her double, which reproduces her in every particular, down to the buttons on her blouse and the threads that fix them there. Studying the pale, white-yellow eyes, whose irises and pupils are delineated by fine grooves, she opens her mouth; the double does the same, opening a colorless mouth filled with facsimile teeth and tongue. After a thorough investigation, Miss Woodwind leads her obliging double through the door and conducts her to her bed. The double stretches herself out on top of the covers. Without pausing to look again, Miss Woodwind snatches up a few of her things, and is gone.

And now with eyes everywhere the Golem is biding his time, waiting until he can get away unobserved—wouldn’t want to give away any trade secrets. After a few days, he’s picked up again. Initially too busy trying to disengage himself from the car he doesn’t notice at first that they are not parked in front of police headquarters. Pracke and Kipe spent the brief trip coughing and making liquid sounds in their throats, and now they assist the Golem through the glass doors of a small private hospital.

Prefect Griepentrog is on the sixth floor, lying in a small bed, hemmed in on all sides by a white linen curtain hanging from a track in the ceiling. A lurid green has crept into his pink complexion, and his oleaginous golden eyes have sprouted crystallized droplets of amber at the corners. His breathing is wet and labored, filtering through curtains of mucus in his lungs and throat. He lies propped up in his bed, hair graying against the stark white pillows and sheets, his hands lying flaccid and hot in his lap, his throat protruding, like warm ruddy parchment, from the collar of his white gown. Kipe approaches, whispers something through a handkerchief (to prevent further infection), and the Prefect turns his wasted gaze, now diffused and colorless, on the party. The Golem stands at the foot of his bed, leaning on the metal frame. He eyes the Prefect with a dire, exhausted look, as though he were about to collapse into a heap of dusty fragments.

Griepentrog opens his mouth, triggering an attack of convulsive coughing, eyes screwed shut, squeezing out thick orange tears. Pracke hands him a cup of water.

The Prefect tries to speak, his chest heaving. He rolls his head on the pillow and strains his wan face—“ . . . you . . . ” he says, feebly waving a finger toward the foot of the bed, “ . . . water . . . ”

Kipe hands him a cup of water. The Prefect knocks it aside, spilling it on the floor, and jerks forward shaking, lips writhing, glaring hatefully at the Golem.

The Golem bends down over Griepentrog's face. With an expression of exaggerated sympathy he makes a glistening funnel of his lips "sshhh . . ." a gush of cesspool breath—Griepentrog hacks and gags, reeling over to the opposite side of the bed, greenish-black filth and gobs of tissue welling from between his clenched teeth. The nurse dashes in round the curtain and insists that they leave, holding Griepentrog's head in her hands as he noisily fouls her uniform. As he turns to go, the Golem's back straightens, the feeble act drops away.

THE UNDERWORLD

Having found his time, the Golem picks his way through the graves—under the bones, under the stones and the caskets, in deep ruts between the plots. Weathered old groundskeepers trickle dust from their footsteps along the ruts, nodding over him as he passes, moving their cold hands weakly from their pockets, into the grass, by the trees. Pickled old men with thousand-year voices wandering on dwindling pathways, in the tombs, on the stones, their frail gramophone voices eddy in stone corners in cobwebs, broken glass of boarded-up tombs, gingerly creaking iron gates rusting off their hinges, cobwebs of rust and water trailing smeared powder of flowers, dried and crumbled, streaking the slabs, running in cracks. The Golem finds his way in sunken paths worn down by mourners' feet, stopping at a stone scroll half-collapsed into the rank grass. Miles away the Divinity Student nods, the Golem pulls the scroll aside, exposing a withered coffin on a bed of dried heather and woven round with white hawthorn. The Golem pulls the coffin open, the nails give way in softened wood, and inside the body is already falling away—inside the coffin he can see water dashing miles away, a quivering streak of reflected light at enormous distance, nearly lost to sight. The cadaver, dressed in its sentimental best, fragile and light as a dried cornhusk, has already vanished down a spiral flight of stairs, moving at unnatural speed owing to the greatly favorable ratio between its weight and its size. The almost silent brushing of its feet on the steps is vanishing without echoing, is already almost inaudible. The Golem drops his head dubiously into the coffin and sniffs—the air is invitingly moist and cold, scented with dust and mothballs and fossilized flowers, perfectly unique, flawless scent.

The Golem raises his braced leg and lunges forward—it clatters down on a metal landing that bobs precariously under him. With care, he brings his other foot down and begins to descend, holding the rim of the coffin, releasing clouds of pollen and pulverized heather. The darkness closes around him and he goes down slowly, the stairs coiling and uncoiling as he shifts his weight from one step to the next, swinging a little, the Golem

feels weak old metal straining through his hands—the light from above is already far away, obscured by the stairs. Then, it's gone forever. The shaft is dark and silent. The earth presses in on all sides and there is no stairway, no river. The earth presses in and crushes him, fills his mouth and eyes, his ears, cold and silent. The Golem flexes in space, murmuring, and the Golem reaches and finds the railing, descends, feeling the steps surely under his feet, listening to the sound of the water coming closer. Nearby the cadaver rattles in its throat—no matter what, the dead always laugh.

Then the Golem takes a step and lunges forward into space, there being no stair there for his foot. He holds onto the rail and lunges backward even as rough, papery fingers claw at his hands. He says, "Get away!" and the hands pull back, behind them a dry rattle in the dark air, then nothing. He gets his feet back above the amputated step and stands there thinking. He can hear the water beneath him, a huge volume of water making no more sound than a hollow, tinkling chuckle where the current wrinkles along the banks of the channel. There is no light anywhere, the water is blackest of all. The Golem leans forward and peers down anyway, feeling only the finest brush of spray on his face. He thinks, resolves himself, and tips himself forward—the stairs snap back upward like a released spring, and the Golem drops straight down into the water, plunging down through the surface into biting cold, tortured blackness of uncontrolled spins in speeding current in water black as oil. His body locks, a half-tumbled half-uncurling ball spinning in vast black water under a glowing ceiling of blue-white ice, curtained round in a sheath of tiny shining bubbles that rise slowly and collect in silver-edged blobs against the pack. The Golem, petrified, shoots down the stream forever, curving round on himself in ice water, turning round on himself in ice water, curving round on himself in ice water, turning round on himself in ice water, driven like a stone through chutes of ice water, down channels of ice water, through chutes of ice water, down channels of ice water, turning and staring, turning, slower and slower over infinite time, churned out in underwater froth into an underground lake, infinitely deep, boiling out in underwater froth from a stone channel—he drops in bottomless water, sinking in the cold, where no light is, his brace pulling him down like an anchor. Finally, the water becomes crushingly heavy, he stops sinking and floats in place, his flesh turning to water, still water in his flesh.

After a time he is aware that he is moving laterally on a weak current. After a time he feels himself bump up against something, an unyielding vertical surface. The current holds him there, eventually pressing him face-to-face with it, something like a stone pylon. With effort, the Golem reaches out to his arms and legs. He has to call them over and over until they come. Blindly fumbling over the surface of the pylon, he finds it is roughly made, covered with protrusions. He finally manages to take one in his hand, find another with his foot, and he begins climbing. Passing in and out of consciousness, he draws himself in the direction he hopes is up. As time goes by, the water seems to become less heavy, he begins to feel the weight of his brace, he begins to feel his own buoyancy. He climbs. Over time, he gradually begins to see his hands in front of him, he can make out a faint radiance, but no surface as yet. He climbs with his neck craned back. Like a man half-asleep he begins to see a surface far away. He climbs, and he can make out a thin line running across the surface, one that will intersect with his column. He can dimly make out other pylons in the water, miles off in either direction.

Then in a moment his head breaks the surface, which is still, and he freezes, feeling as if his head will burst in thin air. Stunned, he hangs there a moment. Then, he climbs out. The air restores his weight but relieves the pressure of the water. He climbs up, pulling himself over a stone railing onto an elevated road. He falls forward onto his face and lies there, staring beyond exhaustion at the surface of the road.

After a while, the Golem gets up and begins walking. The road stretches off in either direction in an endless series of bounding arches, from pylon to pylon, only a few yards beneath the roof of the vault. The water stretches off into a misty, horizonless distance, completely still, not even lapping at the pylons. The Golem walks pointlessly, with his head down, moving in one direction, although the road begins to branch almost immediately, spreading out like a web over the surface of the water as far as he can see.

Suddenly he has bumped into something—looking up he sees a tree growing in a huge clod of earth, sitting by the side of the road. A man is hanging from the tree; this is what he bumped into. Looking more closely, the Golem can see that the rope that hangs the man is not suspended from the branches, but extends up past the top of the tree to vanish into the vault's ceiling. Looking more closely, the Golem can see that the hanged man is the Golem—he is upside down. The Golem stares into the Golem's

face, slack but not discolored, for a long time. Then, he reaches into his mouth and pulls a little on the end of his tongue. The stitches that hold it there writhe out of their holes and the tongue comes loose in his hand. The Golem gently turns the tongue over and slides it into the Golem's gaping mouth, caked with dried blood, showing a stump where his tongue had been. The sutures in the Golem's tongue bore into the stump and cinch the new tongue firm . . . the Golem kneels, and places his ear to the Golem's mouth. The lips move against his ear—the tongue tells him which way to go, where to look, then falls silent. The Golem retrieves his tongue and puts it back in his own mouth; it tastes of bitter blood and rusty shears. The Golem wanted to cut the Golem down, but the Golem had told him simply to leave, and he does. When he looked back several hours later, he couldn't see the tree, the rope, or the Golem.

When the vault opens out in all directions, the Golem can see the city spread out on the water, floating on a vast raft of tar-coated pilings. The city is only barely visible, as a complicated three-dimensional constellation of dim lights. Nearby, the road opens out onto a shelf in the cavern wall, which closes in around the road as he approaches, a puncture in a larger bubble in stone, the walls rushing in from out of limitless distance. There is a small railyard laid out on the shelf, lit by tall sodium lights, shadowy, charcoal-colored figures moving in and out among the heavy cars. The road leads into the yard, and then out again the other side—from here, the only way into the city. The Golem comes closer, and the figures seem to withdraw, having lined up a set of empty cars on the tracks. By weaving in and out among the cars and piles of empty crates, the Golem is able to avoid being seen. He walks out onto the center of the platform, crossing behind the line of cars, heading for the darker edge of the shelf. The platform is sheeted with oily steel; his footsteps rap on the steel as he crosses over past the rails. The cars are cable cars, pulled along by heavy chains set in grooves in the steel platform—the chain presumably attached to a winch at each end. As he crosses behind them, the line of cars begins to move, rolling down toward the city.

The Golem suddenly looks down at the groove beneath his feet in time to see the chain snag his leg brace as it slashes by and he is torn from his feet and falls half-turning and flying over the ground—he lands on his arm, his hand held out a little reaching and crushed back against his chest—his head whips on his neck, batters against the steel—his brace still caught he is

dragged along with it slicing along the platform and then out over pummeling wooden ties—he is dragged unnoticed behind the cars—they tilt down over a rough concrete ramp with steps cut into it and the Golem is pulled down behind them and into the water at the bottom, he cannot lose consciousness—in the shock of the water he feels himself nearly twisting free from his caught leg, the weight of the water stretches him, he tries to reach up over his locked knee to the snag in the brace but the force of the water is pushing him back, his arms are shattered and torn open—the cars are yanked out of the water and the Golem is slammed against a concrete embankment, his unbraced left leg trails behind him nearly bent double at the ankle, he still can't pass out, he can't come apart, he even has to keep jerking to the right to keep his body from being caught by the other end of the chain going the opposite direction—if he were caught on both chains he'd be ripped in two at once—a steel shelf comes up and chops at his left hip, he is flipped back and his head slams against the edge, but he is still conscious, the sutures hold, his back is burning with friction against the shelf, the cars turn a corner and again he nearly twists off his braced leg, his whole body ready to come apart but the sutures won't give way even as the flesh around them tears—he is dragged past a platform and his head snaps back against one of the supports, his left eye clawed by a rivet, and as he is flipped again he sees they are crossing an embankment, the storehouse is up ahead, the cars disconnecting from the chain as they come in, the chain is speeding up as it is less and less encumbered, heading for the huge toothed gear that turns it and the Golem realizes he'll be shredded by that gear—as he is pulled over a small bump his upper body flips up into a sitting position for a moment and, with his still-working left arm, he seizes his locked brace and holds himself in place, upright, pulling in a frenzy at the brace—the brace yields, unhooks, and he goes tumbling down the embankment to land face-first in thick mud and cold water. He has not lost consciousness.

With pain, he begins to paw at the bank with his left arm, the right floating useless in the water. He paws at the bank for a long time, without thinking, eventually realizes that he's caught hold of a root. Almost inert, he pulls weakly at it, drawing himself slowly up the bank. His braced leg, wrenched but working, flounders a little in the water and against the bank, finally finding enough leverage to push him forward. By pushing off with his leg and pulling himself with his arm, he is able to drag himself up the bank, holding his head up with increasing pain. Every now and then he

stops, dropping his head in the mud. If he could get into the water, he might be able to pull himself along more easily if his leg brace weren't so heavy. Instead, he struggles along in the mud, occasionally turning his face up to look at the impossibly high bank overhead. He doesn't know whether he should waste his energy trying to climb it, or keep going along the water's edge in the hope it will level out further on. He hauls himself up onto a small mound and sees the city lights stretching out in front of him, and up to one side. He can see he's on the edge of the raft on which the city rests, on a lip of pilings sticking out from beneath. The mud is runoff from the earth heaped on top of the raft. Pivoting on his stomach, he angles his body up the bank and starts climbing—if he loses his footing he could slide right down into the water. His grip fails once, but he turns as he slides and digs his brace into the muck, anchoring himself. Then he hauls himself up over the edge, feeling like he's passing through a mangle, and comes to rest on top.

From where his head falls, he can see a few buildings across a narrow, empty street. He's lying on a thin strip of park by the water. Presently, he starts scrabbling along on his belly, the wet grass lets him slip along without too much trouble. He can see smudged figures moving in the street—they ignore him. He keeps his head low to the ground, turned toward the street, the grass brushing by against his cheek. With his one working eye, he sees a surgical supply store across the street—actually down a short side alley opening onto a bigger boulevard on the far side. Mechanically, the Golem begins slithering toward it—the cobblestones tearing at his underside, the cloth of his shirt worn away, he narrowly misses being run over by a huge, clattering shape. He manages the sidewalk and batters the door with his left arm—it's unlocked. Inside, bleary figures shriek and draw out of his way, he can hear echoing protests from someone standing over him, nudging his broken ribs with the toe of its shoe. The Golem ignores them, his eyes have fixed on a bottle of formaldehyde on a conveniently low shelf. He knocks away the stopper with a swipe of his arm, falling forward off-balance, then rolls over onto his back, tilting the bottle off the shelf with him, splattering the formaldehyde into his mouth. With his left arm he heaves the bottle downside-up and pours it in, feeling it chime through his limbs—his ruined left leg straightens, the back of his head uncollapses, his ruined right eye inflates in its socket, his body's form is restored, although still broken and rent apart. The bottle drained, the voices now silent, the sounds of footsteps

rattling out the door, he seizes a second bottle, rolling over onto his back, much stronger now. He balances the bottle on his back and seizes an IV stand by its base, pulling it along with him as he crawls out through the back of the store into a courtyard, open to one side, littered with rubbish, machine parts, an old car. The Golem navigates through the clutter and crawls into something like an old chicken coop. With increasing pain and irritability he props the bottle on a ledge over his head, dragging the bottle down from the IV stand. He knocks the stopper off the bottle of formaldehyde and jams the stopper from the IV bottle in its place, catching up the few splashes of formaldehyde with his mouth, as best he can. The formaldehyde runs down the tube and trickles out the needle. The Golem fumbles impossibly with his sleeve a moment, then gives up and jabs the needle directly into his neck. He drops his head back on the planks and passes out.

When the bell rings, the Golem is shocked awake. He turns the bottle upright and plucks out the needle from his neck, wandering unsteadily out into the street. A series of chimes are being hung in the air, one at a time, ornamenteally reverberating from the dingy storefronts, trickling around his feet. He cranes his ears in a circle and begins to follow the sound toward its source, not so much the bell as the hand ringing it. Streets swivel around him, figures run by or sit and gnaw illusions like praying mantises. The city is scored across with fissures where the segments of the raft are caused to float side by side, by means of heavy girders, bearded with seaweed, and by curved bridges. Small channels help divert the weight of the water beneath onto the top of the raft, making it more neutrally buoyant—large, flat, sluglike fish cruise by in the channels, nibbling at the tarred lining and glancing girlishly up at the Golem with their dead eyes. The bell makes them wince and shrink back into themselves.

The street the Golem is following opens out—the museum occupies one side of the deserted square. He wanders toward the museum portico haphazardly, and looking up only a moment he notices a pair of golden eyes watching him from a quiet corner of the bell tower . . . and a small coral smile . . . in a pale face . . . This figure seems to be wearing his clothes, and holds a painted fan, and vanishes back into the shadows of the bell tower to the laughing cries of its birds. The Golem rushes up the steps and knocks the heavy bronze doors open, staggering into the lanes of the endlessly radiating galleries; his brace clatters on the hard floor, the noise carols

through the dark, into the corners. Phantoms everywhere pull back obscurely, through patterned ravelings of shade in the lee of looming windows and curtained foyers, bewildered and annoyed by the noise. Under glass in every exhibition, the bell's softest note is humming in place, biding itself without diminishing, below the threshold of audibility.

There skittering along a railing or flashing by at the far end of the room —fluttering wings, the glint of a perfectly round, webbed eye, the dry scraping of claws on marble floors . . . the Golem follows the bell tower birds, clambering after as best he can, always late. Unable to move fast or adroitly, he is only just able to catch a glimpse of them before she disappears again. On several occasions birds erupt from the dark only a few feet away from him, he hears the rustle of her skirts, but so fast do these eruptions come and go he has no time to move at all, even to jerk back in surprise. In the dark, he can't see them coming—but here, in this corner, he sees a woman's foot—there on the banister, a woman's hand—and her fragrance, blown here and there by the energetic flapping of birds' wings, lingers everywhere in the air, stronger and less strong by turns. This fragrance materializes from time to time in tiny flurries of bees with bright yellow stripes, and the humming of bees' wings and the rapping of birds' wings grows louder as he searches, but only by barely perceptible degrees.

The Golem is getting impatient. He is now standing on one side of a partition wall running the length of an enormous room. This wall is broken through with windows at floor level, and the other half of the room is several feet lower. When he sees the flash of her teeth in those windows on the other side, he bashes the glass in with a few light knocks of his brace and ducks through the window, landing on his braced leg, this coils beneath his weight like a spring and then rebounds, shooting him along the partition, following the cooler, less dusty contour in the air left by her body as it passed a second earlier. He is brought in this way to the base of a flight of stairs, which he climbs. There's another gallery at the top—the trees have thrust their branches in through the empty windows, their silver-dollar shaped leaves wiggle along the ceiling. In the light of those windows, shining for the most part beneath the branches, he can see a deep gulf in the floor, opening onto a vast orchestra pit far below—there are heavily curtained boxes on the walls facing him across the gulf. As the Golem peers down into the darkness, the idea that she is present, watching him, begins to grow in his mind.

Night has fallen above ground, and Miss Woodwind has slipped stealthily into the park. Nimbly picking her way through the dense bracken, beneath the wiry black limbs of the barren trees, she pursues upstream the course of a flickering, talking brook, whose slick rocks shine like opals in the moon's waxing light, whose fragrant billows fold along the edges of its bed with a crinkling sound. Now, close to the source, she kneels beside the stream.

In a box furnished with two elegant, white-upholstered, gold-painted chairs, and hung all over with heavy golden ornaments, he sees a magnificent, queenly woman—her skin is as white as paper, her hair is as black as ink—the fiery roll of her black bangs shines like a polished oil drum—her pointed lips and nails are scarlet as the red of my binding—her mistletoe eyes are maned with black lashes coal-sable—her dress striped gold and blue like quire-stitches—she appears beneath an arch, because the arch is our symbol for the dream.

Miss Woodwind slips her left hand under the water, along its bed, until, lying on her side, her entire left arm cradles the stream like a bolt of cold cloth—with dreamlike slowness she brings her right arm up through the air and down to rest on the surface of the water.

Christine smiles into space at first, her face gleams. Then she seems to notice the Golem—her eyes widen, whitening their sockets, and from her lips escape the inverted white arch of her gloating grin—a baroque, sharky grin glistening with venom, a grin you want to suck like hard candy—a jaw breaker. Her throat is girdled with a garland of beautiful paper flowers, which promiscuously offer their jasmine and orange blossom perfumes to the engorged air.

Miss Woodwind's softened senses tell her that her left shoulder has slipped a little—and with a gradual inclination forward, she then tilts all at once and slips beneath the stream, holding it still in her arms and borne off by its current into the dark. As a cold dream presses its lips about her form, the water turns dark, shivers and divides into randomly mingled ribbons of black and white, scribbling across each other, form lines, illegible words . . .

A spur of desire, new to him and alarming, penetrates the Golem as he first lays eyes on Christine. From now on, his cane is also a sword with a broken blade, upon which every word he speaks will be in elegant handwriting finely engraved. He ransacks his mind for some way to cross

the gulf separating them, but knows already that she will not stand still. But her eyes are glimmering with light like a madwoman's, her purring face is all opalescent syrup on the cold, lightless air, the tresses she indistinctly shakes are as splendid as a crown, her teeth are sheathed in a membrane of dewy saliva, like oil-of-glass, which gives luster to her coral lips, her chalcedony breath sifts across the breach to alight on his face.

"Go away!" she says. Did he hear those words, or only find them written inside? They are associated with the echo of a faraway and thrillingly low voice—but her lips didn't move. Again he hears, or somehow receives, the caressing words "Go away!"

Still wracking his brains for some way to cross to her—even as her eyes, her presence, rivets him to the spot, stops his arms and legs. Her breath, her perfume, the air throbs around her like a pulsing mouth, a soft and trembling babyish lip . . .

Now she seems to laugh at him, or almost—"Haven't you gone yet?"

The Golem is beginning to feel light-headed. He shouldn't have tried his feet so quickly, he hasn't healed properly. He feels the puncture in his neck and wishes for the IV. But he doesn't take his eyes from Christine.

She hasn't stopped smiling. If anything, she's smiling more and more. It hasn't been more than a moment since she last spoke. Her hands, which up until now had been clasped demurely in front of her, now rest on a lever protruding from the floor.

"Very well—catch me if you can!"

The lever is pulled—although Christine still has not moved. With a dull rattle of wooden cogs the walls of the museum unlace around them like unmeshing fingers and spread to either side like wings, galleries and hallways scrolling smoothly past, and Christine, her face now streaked with tears, her mouth livid and pale, the lips compressed, drifts past in an alcove lined with vermillion fabric, and out of sight. Her bowed neck will become an arch passing over him. The Golem stares weakly around at the moving walls and scanning doorways, finally bolting through an aperture at random, and from there trying to thread his way out again. The museum churns, swapping floors and rooms, basement for attic and back again, shifting in all directions at once like a moving labyrinth, but eventually the Golem manages to navigate out into the square again. Behind him, the museum withdraws into the shadows, still disarticulating and sliding

through itself like an elaborate explosion. He can tell that she's already far away.

THE SECRETARY AND THE MUSEUM

Christine never takes the same street twice, but she knew that she would inevitably be seen. He lurks everywhere, setting up precisely timed “spontaneous” encounters, parting the city at every corner with his skulking, waiting to meet her again. She watches the dripping eaves overhead as she weaves across short bridges and suspended walkways toward the heart of the city, where the monumental buildings rise directly from the water, some nearly brush the roof of the cavern, while others penetrate it and rise higher still. As she moves into their shadows she can feel a cold exposed feeling shiver across her back, and turning she catches a momentary glimpse of him before he melts again into shadows of his own. The same loping silhouette, where had she seen it before?

She turns and slips around the corner onto her street. The desultory lighting from hanging lamps and unshaded windows fills the street with a pallid glow the color of watery milk. Without running, assuming she is even now under his gaze, she hurriedly glides through the doors to her building and into the elevator. As the doors glide shut she remembers how she’d seen him, looming ominously over her open windowsill from across the cavernous distance of her bedroom. Distant enough for her to escape. She had hidden herself in the tiny milk-drop compartment in the wall and watched him come creaking through the door and scan the room with a slow sweep of his leaden, pasty face. It had seemed to her that his face telescoped out into the room on a stalk, peering into corners and behind the drapes, but nothing like that had actually happened. He had simply failed to find her and left hastily, perhaps in the hope of catching her outside.

She moved house right away. She’d rather negligently arranged to have her expense money sent to her directly—but after a narrow escape in the mail room she now picks up the plain yellow envelopes—filled with the strange, scorched-black paper coins engraved with ghostly white letters that are the currency here—at the post office. Now he is after her again; he’s found her new address somehow. She wants to get a few things from her

apartment before she moves on again: it wouldn't do to cheat him of these precious few glimpses.

Something batters faintly against the floor of the elevator, directly beneath her feet. Christine jerks away—another blow harder this time and the thin plywood panel pops up, the metal floor distends. Christine presses against the doors watching the numbers change with rapt attention. Another blow and this time she can hear the metal tear and the sounds of the shaft come echoing through. Behind her she is listening to his hands scrabbling along the edges of the rent he's made, pulling the metal wide apart. The floor light shifts the bell rings and the doors swing open, she flits out into the corridor even as she hears the floor giving way, the doors clicking shut.

He'll catch her on the stairs, her door, even locked, wouldn't stop him—it hadn't the first time—so she runs to the window at the end of the hall. Stepping out onto the ledge she estimates the distance to the next building. Glancing back—he's stepping out into the passage, silhouetted in the elevator light, bent with his hands hanging down and his arms curved in beneath him. With all her strength she stiffens her body and rises in the air, her skirts twisting around her legs. She sails, executing one complete revolution with her arms outstretched, across the gap, glimpsing water flashing hundreds of feet below where the foundations sink out of sight, and tilting gracefully back onto the cushions of the air she drops feet first through the opposite window. From there she need only traverse the length of the hall to the opposite stairwell.

The Golem follows only moments later, crashing down onto the fire escape outside, which bends under his weight with the sound of shrieking metal, the rivets pulling free from the wall. The slats snap beneath his feet and he has to pull himself through the window by the jam—his weight nearly wrenches the frame loose, the glass in the panes squeezes then shatters, but he lunges forward in time, is not tangled up and dragged down the building's considerable length by the collapsing fire escape. Christine is already at the stairwell. Loping after her, he pulls the door off of its hinges and it falls awkwardly to the floor. From the landing, he can see her face staring placidly up at him, smiling, spiraling down into the blackness. She's sliding down the banister, circling round and round out of sight, lit intermittently by the windows in the fire doors.

The Golem leaps down to the first landing, scattering broken tiles where he lands. Using the banister poles to sling himself around he leaps again

and again, from landing to landing with jarring force, whipping around to pounce once more, sending cracks up the plaster walls and deafening reports rebounding along the shaft. Far below, Christine's shining white face recedes in concentric circles, trained on him, and smiling . . .

Down a dark corridor and across the ensuing room; large, damp, irregularly lit, many doors, oversized packing crates stacked high on its floors, and immediately before her, a short flight of plank steps. She stops for a moment puzzling which way to go, the door swinging shut behind her —thud thud thud down hundreds of storys.

Someone emerges from behind the plank steps opposite the door, holding her arms folded across her chest. She is plain, with blonde hair piled on top of her head, and wearing a heavy coat, buttoned, with the hood thrown back. It's Magellan's secretary.

"Go on, up these stairs and out that door—here, I'll unlock it for you," she's pointing to the steps where she'd been hiding, pulling out a rusty ring with a number of keys.

"Why Miss Woodwind, whatever are *you* doing here?"

She trips up the plank steps, unlocks the door at the top and throws it open, revealing an arched passage of dank black brick.

"There's a train station just beyond the end of the passage. Don't hesitate, but go as quickly as you can."

"You still haven't answered me—why are *you* here?"

But Miss Woodwind is looking past her, over Christine's shoulder, across the room. The pounding on the staircase is getting louder. She rustles down the steps again and takes Christine's shoulders in her two weightless hands.

"I've managed him before, don't worry about me. I'm here for *you*, Miss Dalman."

Christine's eyebrows pop up.

"Don't waste time!"

But Christine lingers, as though transfixed by the suspense between going and staying—to watch them together.

"He cannot be stopped," Miss Woodwind adds, bringing her face in close, where Christine can feel her feathery breathing on her face, and smell her perfume. Miss Woodwind's fingers are strong on her shoulders.

"You're not going to let him catch you?"

"What are you playing at? Who sent you?"

“I’ll hold him off as long as I can—”

Miss Woodwind’s eyes are powerful; they bore into Christine’s face. Christine seems to be thinking about saying something, now thinking better of it. She’s smiling.

A little miffed, Miss Woodwind makes a curt gesture toward the door, and this time Christine spirits herself swiftly through and down the passage. Miss Woodwind shuts the door behind her and hastily locks it, rushes down the stairs and back into the room.

She hangs the key on a hook attached to the banister and crosses the room again, pulling crates down, knocking them into an obstacle course. Already she can hear his jangling step. Casting about at a moment’s notice, she takes her belt from around her waist, holding it up in one hand, and, seizing a crowbar from the floor, she hides by the door.

It flies open and he plows through, making straight for the opposing door with unerring instinct. Miss Woodwind leaps up and outstrips him with effort, interposing herself in his path, standing on a crate. The moment of recognition she was waiting for doesn’t happen; he keeps going. She lashes at him with the end of her belt, snipping it across his cheek, but the moment it touches his flesh it bursts apart in crackling cinders like a string of firecrackers. He evades her and presses on for the steps, batting crates out of the way with smashing swings of his braced leg. Miss Woodwind leaps onto his back with the crowbar in her hands, swinging its hook down under his chin, pulling back with all her might, trying to crush his throat. Without slowing down he bends forward and grabs her by the back of her coat, plucking her off his back with one hand and tossing her across the room like a rag doll. She crashes gracelessly against a metal pipe, nearly shearing it off, and the end of the crowbar smashes a glass panel that had been painted over, making it look like part of the wall. A fireman’s axe hangs inside. Recovering herself (the Golem is already at the top of the stairs, raising his fingers to shiver the lock apart) she seizes the axe and charges up behind him, burying its head between his shoulder blades.

The Golem collapses. His coat seems to fall empty across the steps, then liquefies and oozes down between the planks like black syrup. She can hear meaty splatting sounds from below. For a moment she stands still and thinks, gnawing her lips, her eyebrows pressed down and together. Then, rushing down the steps, she kicks the crates aside in time to see the Golem’s sections, having unsutured themselves, neatly lined up and slithering one by

one down an open drain. The black coat-ooze is just draining its last before she can get to the hole—her fingers clutch at rustling cloth before it snaps out of her hands.

That drain opens on the other side of the door. She turns and runs back up the stairs—he hadn’t shivered the lock apart when she struck him, she’ll need the key.

On the other side of the door, the Golem’s hand flicks the grating off the drain. Another hand pops out and like spiders they scuttle across the floor, pulling the black bulk of a sleeve, with an arm in it, after them.

Miss Woodwind bounds down the steps, through heavy crates and rough wooden boxes, snarling with frustration, her eyes fixed on the keys hanging by the door on the other side of the room.

Now the coat is lying flat on the ground on the other side of the door, two hands fluttering around trying to fix themselves to hidden wrists up inside the sleeves. A rib cage and spinal chord spring out of the drain, flickering forward on the rib ends like a scorpion, the vertebrae coiled threateningly overhead, the pelvis being the stinger. It raises the hem of the coat and crawls underneath. Already anonymous undifferentiated tissues are slurping after it like creeping vines from the drain.

Miss Woodwind is across the room now. She snatches the key ring from its hook, lunging back again toward the stairs like a swimmer forcing her way into a raging surf, kicking and punching obstacles out of the way.

The full body is sitting by the drain now. It holds up one leg, brace included, and a foot in its shoe pops out of the hole like toast from a toaster and drops into the stirrup of the brace, the ankle mating with the end of the calf with an audible click. Naked eyes in a skull face watch with expressionless satisfaction as the ankle inclines twice to demonstrate the soundness of the articulation, before the next stump is held up.

Miss Woodwind finally makes it to the steps only to come up short at the landing—which key?!

Finally, the Golem shoves his skull face into the drain for a moment and then rises to his feet in one motion. His cane jumps up into his hand. He reaches out with the end and pushes a heavy wardrobe over, it lands on its side, blocks the door. His face still slithering into its sutures around his jaws and forehead, he lurches off after Christine.

Miss Woodwind tears the door open at that moment, in time to see the wardrobe barring her way. She claws at its adamant wooden back but it’s

far too heavy even for her to move. The Golem's footsteps echo indifferently back to her, diminishing, down the hall—she shouts after him and ineffectually butts at the wardrobe with her shoulder.

The train is sitting empty and open at the station. Christine takes her seat by the window and waits anxiously for the doors to close, staring back over her shoulder for any sign of the Golem. The bell sounds, the doors close, the train tugs gently forward. She is alone in the car, watching the lights spin out from the windows as the train climbs into the sky on suspended rails, snaking along between the buildings, stories above the ground. Tilting backward against the inclination of the train, she walks down the aisle to the window at the back of the car so that she can see down the rails, but there is no train following this one. She goes back to her seat, cocking her chin up thoughtfully.

Offices flash by at her level, and later on descending again. From moment to moment, gaps between the buildings reveal vistas of the black lake beyond, visible only as a darker patch against the perpendicular banks, striped with broken gleams of reflected city lights—the tracks hang on steel cables fixed to the roof of the cavern itself. Last stop, in the center of the city. The doors sigh open. Christine steps out onto the concrete platform and crosses under the tracks, through a featureless passageway whose walls glisten with a vile, pallid, yellow color like the inside of an esophagus. From where she emerges she can see the broad square beyond, with a dead fountain, broad swaths of dewy grass, and she can smell their cool green breath on the lake-breeze. An electrical crack sounds from the track. She turns and looks—the electrified rail had grounded to the Golem's leg brace as he stepped over it, walking toward her out of a limitless windy night behind him. He is unhurt and lists forward, slamming awkwardly against the raised platform on which she stands, slapping his arms down straight in front of him on the platform, levering himself up. She can see the blackened welts on his hands, a very satisfactory testament to her beauty, where he had clung to the bottom of her car.

Christine turns and runs down the other side of the platform and across the square, first the snicker of her boots on the cobbles, and then a moment later the swishing of her feet through the grass. The Golem is coming up fast behind her, mechanically bolting into the square in her wake. Christine runs to the closest open building—the titanic central clock tower—through polished doors, resignedly mounting the red-carpeted stairs with

extraordinary speed. She can hear his footsteps outside. She watches to make sure he's following her, and as his shadow falls across the broad steps, she sends a massive bronze urn tumbling down the shaft to greet him, then runs without bothering to watch, already knowing he won't be deterred, that Miss Woodwind was right—he can't be stopped.

She passes swiftly through a partition into the works, scaling the metal steps that hug the walls. The soft white glow of the clock face is the only light, a brassy gleam in the workings. A faint breeze pulses across her face at intervals, and staring up she can see a gargantuan pendulum sweeping back and forth only a few feet away. Even though it doesn't touch the stairs, she still times her own passage to avoid it. Its weight is a perfect brass ball, bigger than she is, polished as bright and reflective as a mirror. She rushes on, guided by the whirrings and clickings of the clockwork massed at the top of the tower.

The Golem blunders in and starts up the steps behind her. By now she's moved through the clock itself and is ready to step out onto the roof just above the face, but she pauses to watch him climb. He moves as regularly and unconsciously as if he were a part of the works, the tapping of his feet blending into the buzzings of the clock, shadowed by the sounds of the clock. But she is not ready to be captured. She steps out onto the roof, and over the partition onto the narrow ledge beyond, raises her hands . . . The Golem lurches to the top of the steps and out onto the roof. Christine stands on the ledge, her arms raised. He moves toward her, but as he draws near a flock of birds drops out of nowhere and swarms around her, like a curtain of flapping wings. The next moment, they are flying off together, with her suspended in their midst, dimly visible in silhouette among a scintillating screen of beating gray wings.

The Golem watches her go, thinking furiously, shuffling his feet, feeling stupid. Then, with unfailing intuition, he strikes the roof with his cane, and in that instant the roof turns transparent, and he can see the cogs and gears whirring smoothly beneath his feet. The Golem kneels, with pain, and presses the silver head of his cane to first one eye, then the other, over and over again, the tip of the cane planted on the roof, like an upward-ended extension of the pendulum. He repeats the gesture until he is synchronized with the works, and then opens his eyes. Now the invisible portions of the machine are beginning to appear, adumbrations normally secret to the soul of the clock, and he can see how it radiates its works all throughout the city,

how all the city is regulated and run on the unwinding of these coils, the shifting of these weights, the regular swing of the pendulum, the ticking of the gears through increments of space. Unseen arms, like the boom of a crane, telescope out over the streets and span the distance all the way to the lake, and from each arm wires and control rods spool and extend/retract like spectral puppeteer's cords. Now that he can see them, the Golem clammers on to one of the arms and crawls along its length, after her—she is a distant, warbling cloud. The arm sweeps out in her direction like the outstretched arm of a giant, with the Golem creeping on it, eyes on her, confused by her corona of fluttering birds, receding away from him.

Their gray wings flicker in blue light—they're mourning doves, just like the ones who used to sing morosely to him when he was attending the Seminary . . .

Still hot on her heels as she disappears into the safety of the museum's cavernous galleries. From moment to moment it shuffles its rooms like cards in a deck, wooden cogs dully rattling underground, rearranging huge sections like the blades of a fan, positioning and rearticulating them most of all like the glass plates of a magic lantern, etched with wan motionless statues and charming pink-and-white portraits. But, always watching, she can see the Golem is threading through the rolling doorways after her, following the extremely subtle traces of her track without fail; the vast clock works don't seem to confuse him anymore.

She enters the Egyptian wing, which is not moving like the others—its mechanical foundations are broken. There are more stairs at the opposite end of the wing, but the Golem is close behind her, and she's getting bored with running. Catching sight of her, the Golem suddenly stops short, wrenches the lid off of the nearest sarcophagus and leaps inside, sifting down through the mummy's wrappings like mist through a screen. A moment later he bursts through the stone cap of the sarcophagus immediately to her left, his body seething up through the linen as the lid shatters to pieces with a fantastic racket, and, as he does this, his movements send the mummy's gold mask flying through the air. Christine, recoiling from his clumsy embraces, catches the mask dexterously and cradles it tenderly in her arms. She recedes into the shadows, pressing the mask to her face.

Now she can see as the Golem sees, with dead eyes for the pathways of dead footprints across the floor. As she moves in and out of the shadows,

her face is sometimes the mask and sometimes the mask subsumed into her own face, gold where the mask is gold, blue where the mask is blue, and shining clear quartz-coral eyes. She is lost, vanishes in among the glass cases.

The Golem stalks after her carefully. He can no longer track her—not while she is wearing the mask. He weaves silently among the exhibits, moving toward the rear wall diagonally. Then their eyes meet, hers staring out at his, from the mask. There are reeds around the base of the urn, and she is hiding there among them. He can hear her rustling and splashing to keep out of sight, but for the moment he still sees her eyes in the watching mask. As carefully as he can, he presses his hands against the side of the urn, but he cannot touch the rushes. They wave behind his hands in a breeze he can't feel, and the water ripples under his fingers but he can't see the bank. Christine is every moment escaping farther and farther away.

The Golem looks around for something useful. A rigid, sleek stone dog nods its head and up-pricked ears at a jar standing alone in the corner. For a moment the dog's chiseled features seem precariously balanced, the grooves poised to expand and draw him inside its stone blackness like hinges. He tears his eyes free and walks to the jar, thinking. He taps it lightly on its sealed mouth with the head of his cane.

The jar topples without breaking, and winged scarabs blow out of its yawning mouth. The scarabs fly in among the reeds, whining and clacking their black parts, confounding Christine in her hiding place. Vexed, she is presently forced from the cover of the reeds and back among the exhibits, haloed by whining scarabs. The Golem chases after her, but he is slow and she is fast—the mask still cool and gold on her face.

Her one hope is the cache of canopic jars huddled together on a plain marble block. She fiddles with them, touching them, trying to find the one with his organs in it. Swatting beetles with one hand, the fingers of the other flicker across the limestone jars as if they were cards in an index, searching the cartouches carved on their sides for the one that spelled the Golem's name/the Divinity Student's name. But she is confounded again by the cyclone of bugs, growing thicker with every instant, pouring in blasts of hot air out of the jar. The Golem is coming, she's run out of time. She takes down her ankh and flail from the wall and opens a sarcophagus with them, causing billows of water to sluice out, lifting off the lid and carrying it

speeding on the current. The heavy basalt lid torpedoes the Golem, sending him flying off to one side.

The water is rising quickly, flooding the room. A moment later it bursts the windows and flows out onto the garden bank beyond, heading for the lake. The Golem hurtles out on a curtain of water, catching for a moment a glimpse of Christine, her image kaleided by tiny balls of water and a curtain of foam, multiplying her into a thousand gray shapes with shining, laughing faces of blue and gold. The current carries her out as well, and through the foam and flying water she sees the Golem multiplied into a thousand black shapes with wan, sad faces and invisible halos like black holes behind them.

THE PRISONER IN THE FISH

The Golem wakes, draped around a bronze horse rearing in the square. His leg brace had somehow locked in the crooked position, and the hook of his leg had entangled him among the legs of the statue as he was swept along, unconscious. He reaches one sopping arm and unlocks the brace, dragging his stiff body off the pedestal, clattering to the cobbles. The streets are deserted and silent—she is still lost. She is somewhere in the city, but now he is cut off from her by the mask she wears. For a while all he can do is make feeble, abortive gestures reaching out to somewhere, for her, falling back each time in confusion and dissolution—she is impermeably curtained off. Now his strength is melting away soft and disabling like a slow punch in the stomach. He only stands where he is, holding his nose up in the air, like an abandoned dog. Feeling the heavy weight of his dead flesh and soggy clothes, the Golem staggers off randomly, still forlornly spying from side to side as he walks, looking for any signs of her.

On all sides, the city rises blank and ruined, hollowed and burned out, all vacant. Its streets are strewn with rotting clutter drooled from doors and windows, and the breeze stinks of old soot and moldering wood, dust from falling plaster. The Golem trudges through this desolation dragging his cane over the scarred cobbles and his head downcast.

Gradually, without knowing when he first notices it, he can hear a man's voice, groaning from somewhere. He looks around, but none of the houses seem to be inhabited. He walks in a circle, his eyes squinting and unsquinting, trying to make out the source of the sound. A narrow alleyway formed by two slanting walls of blackened bricks sweating slime—the Golem picks his way through the litter down the passage, tracing the intermittent groans to a battered stone building with bars on its windows.

The front door opens smoothly on its hinges, without a sound, and instantly the groans becomes louder, or at least less muffled. A narrow hallway runs to the back of the house, without a single door along its length—nothing but dull, featureless wooden panels. The Golem walks down the tiled floor to the back, where the hall opens on a tiny parlor, with a sofa in

the opposite corner. It's brownish-gray, with rough upholstery and a stern wooden frame, with no movable cushions. Just around the corner there is an opening in the wall, with a cell door set in it. Someone, clinging to the bars as the Golem enters, springs back in shock and surprise into the shadows toward the back of the cell. The Golem can barely make out a whitish figure pressed against the stone wall with its single, tiny, barred window.

“You!” the figure cries incredulously. “You!”

The Golem's brow furrows. He stands a few feet in front of the cell door, staring.

“Have you come to release me?” the voice comes again, and the figure rushes forward and throws itself on the bars. It's Ollimer.

“What are you doing there?” the Golem asks.

“What am I doing here? What am I doing here?! Don't you remember?” His eyes are starting from his head, his grimy face contorts in sorrow and contrition. “You *put* me in here!”

The Golem ponders for a moment. Then he wanders over to the sofa and sits, not looking at Ollimer.

Ollimer waves his arms, the frayed ends of his shirtsleeves trailing from his elbows. He cannot see the Golem from where he is.

“Please—let me out!”

For a moment there is no reply.

“You mean to say you've been in there all this time?”

“For eternities! I'm begging you, unlock the door!”

Ollimer reaches through the bars, trying to bend around them enough to catch a glimpse of the Golem.

“Has *he* been here?”

“Who?”

“ . . . You were locked away here—when?”

“I don't remember! It's been forever—years!”

“ . . . Why did I lock you up?”

“You don't remember?”

“—No. I'm not the same as you remember me.”

“ . . . You never told me why! . . . I was only doing as I was told—I can't be held responsible if I didn't have a *choice*, can I? Whatever it was, it wasn't my fault! It's not fair! You're just being cruel—please relent, set me free!”

Nothing.

“I implore you!”

Ollimer implores empty air for a moment. Then the Golem speaks again.

“I don’t have the key.”

Ollimer brightens.

“You didn’t take it with you—you left it hanging there on the wall by the divan! Look! It should be on a wooden peg beside the window. Do you see it? Are you really going to let me out?”

But the Golem says nothing. Ollimer is petrified—as if his fate hung in a balance so frail that even an injudicious breath or motion could tip the scales against him.

At the other end of the room, the Golem is run down, like a stopped watch. He’s confused, but he can’t think things through . . . although he hasn’t turned his head, he gradually realizes that Christine is watching him. Her gaze has descended on him. Beyond Ollimer’s cubicle, through the back door standing ajar, and an irregular rhomboid hole in the rear wall, her face is framed in the far distance, dimly beaming blue and gold. He leans forward slowly, bending only at the waist, and his coat is getting blacker, dripping blackness on the floor, and melting into the darkness of the wall.

Ollimer waits, and the Golem leans forward getting darker all the time.

Then, a long, spindly limb, like the black leg of a spider, emerges from the shadow of the Golem’s back, as if it were a hole in the air. Another follows, and another, without sensation for him, curving at their joints to touch the floor, and the walls, and ceiling.

Finally, Ollimer, who can’t see him, swallows painfully and speaks
—“Are you there? Have you found it?”

But there is no reply. The Golem is sprouting more legs sheathed in glossy black chitin, while his body curls into a ball, his head back against his shoulders, and he stares straight ahead with a motionless face. He’s sitting in the corner like a cushion stuck with shiny black needles.

Ollimer, panicky, speaks again: “What’s happening? Where have you gone? Let me out of here!” And he rattles the cage.

The Golem suddenly scuttles by, passing the door swiftly on his many new legs, body rolled up and head staring forward.

“Wait! Where are you going?!” Ollimer screams.

“I don’t know,” the Golem says quietly, as the legs take him smoothly and silently flashing past the bars of the cell door, out into the matted, rank mounds of weeds in the backyard, and up to the opening in the rear wall. In

its center, he can see her mask staring at him out of the blackness, like a beacon, or a gold coin tossed into murky water. A wire runs taut from some point below her face to the base of the wall's opposite side. The Golem's new legs carry him nimbly through the hole, and he can see where the wire is bolted to the perspiring brick foundations of the house with ponderous metal fastenings. Humming a little in the breeze, the wire is as straight as a razor, and the mask hovers in a circle of sourceless light off in the distance, directly above the point where the wire disappears.

With effortless accuracy, the legs whip one in front of the other, carrying him along the wire, up into the "sky," his eyes fixed forward, watching for any sign of a trap.

A pair of tapering white hands appear first, below the mask, resting on a dimly lit level horizontal bar. The fuzzy gray of her dress materializes next, bisected at the waist by a railing. He doesn't notice the wall impending until he passes through the oversized window and into the colossal interior. She is standing directly in front of him, on the lip of titanic storm lantern made of polished brass. The cable is a thread knotted around the base of the lantern, where it sits on a gigantic table. As he comes nearer, she backs away from the railing, leaning against the lamp, her hands splayed on its curved surface beside her hips, and her expressionless golden face craning down and forward on her long neck, waiting. Reflexively sure, the spider legs undulate alternating right then left, perfectly balanced, so that his body does not sway at all.

He can see the surface of the table starting to heave up and down, rolling like a boat in the water, and he can hear waves plashing against a breakwater, and he smells water below him—very deep, very cold, very old, old water. Christine the Magician is staring directly into his eyes—her eyes are clear blue, lined with blue and startling white, pressed into a gold brow and sealed with a puff of frigid air, the cold hollow breath of something dying. They froze then and they freeze now; the Golem freezes in mid-stride, off-balance, and tips off the wire. As he turns in the air, toppling down off the wire, he can see Christine slumping against the lamp, exhausted. Then the shock of the water, and the sensation of stabbing needles of cold as his body sinks quickly down into shadow and silence.

A rumbling, gurgling sound rattles through the water—he twists and sees a huge fish rushing toward him, blank gaping black eyes and a huge yawning mouth opening onto bottomless, fathomless blackness—he flailing

uselessly in the heavy water, churning his arms and many snapping legs, but its shadow is already enveloping him, and the jarring bow wave preceding it rolls him over, slashing ripples of deathly cold from the fish's mouth over his body as the black hole of its mouth swells and closes around him, the faintly lit irregular circle of light between its lips dwindles . . . winks out.

The Golem found the fish's inner chambers familiar, but the memories they recalled were not wholly his memories; they were the Divinity Student's dog-eared, shopworn castoffs. Specifically, they snagged on the way time passed inside the fish, but the Golem was for a long time unable to trace where that time, that flavor of time, had happened before.

Eventually, sitting on a fleshy stump in a small, igloo-shaped enclosure, he gathered it together in his mind. The walls sweated a white, milky oil that congealed in pearly drops around the floor, so that, as he sat there, a glistening, pebbly ring would slowly begin to form all around him. Then, at long intervals, a low tide of brackish, tea-colored froth would flush across the floor, dissolving the pearls instantly and carrying them off down an intestine, and the slow accretion of a new ring would begin again.

The white drops reminded him of white glue, the kind that had been endlessly doled out to younger students at the Seminary—and he jolted back with the force of the recollection. Time passed in the fish precisely as it had at the Seminary—it was like a fall of dust, silent and steady as snow, or a shower that soaked everything, seeping in everywhere. Nothing changed, time only made things heavier, more solid, more dense and fixed. Both here and there (although *he* had never been there), he felt no more real than a superimposition, or a wandering film image. He puzzled over it a while.

It wasn't dark—everywhere the fish's interior was lit by bundles of flabby tubes filled with yellowish gelatin that glowed like sodium lights. These nodes clung to the walls of the passages and sprouted like topaz chandeliers from the ceilings of the larger rooms.

The spider legs had stopped working shortly after he first regained consciousness inside the fish. They hung limp and useless, and he dragged them along behind him like a heavy train for a long time until they finally began to break off of their own accord. Something was corroding them quickly, so that their black chitin turned a blotched gray flecked with green, and they snapped off some time later. He examined the end of the first leg when it came loose—it was a hollow tube of thin metal trailing a few

colored wires, and smeared here and there with minute traces of oil. The dead legs made exploration of the fish impractical—as he lost them, he was able to go further and further, through narrower apertures, until he could make his way around with the same facility as he had at the Seminary. The airless atmosphere exaggerated all motion, giving him the abrupt and awkward appearance of a puppet, but the absence of air pressure and friction made even the most strenuous activity easy, allowing him to climb almost effortlessly through the lattice of arteries and intestines connecting the habitable cells. The vacuum also deadened all sound and smell, and permitted him to see at all times with complete clarity.

The fish's central lung was its most spacious cavity. It was a long oblate cylinder lying on its side, tapering toward the forward end, where water would silently collect in an enormous clear bivalved bulb covered with arabesques in fine white veins. The water would pour into the bulb from the outside, swirl in a wide, sluggish funnel down into the second opening at the bulb's base, and flow from there into a space between the outer and inner membranes of the lung, causing the sulfur-yellow interior walls, floor, and ceiling of the chamber to undulate rhythmically as the fluid passed beneath. The oxygen was absorbed by the lining of the outer lung wall. The exhaust gasses were channeled out through the back portion of the lung, through a screen of interwoven brownish-white cartilage crescents, resembling a chaotic fleur-de-lys pattern. The Golem liked to walk along the walls of the inner membrane, through the alveoli, which were trefoil-shaped porphyry indentations that opened into each other, separated by rigid bony pillars rooted in the floor and ceiling, raised slightly above the level of the central atrium—forming a sort of cloister along which he was able to stroll comfortably.

He spent most of his free time in the cavernous stomach, where he had first been deposited when the fish swallowed him. The lining was bluish-white, pulpy, and fibrous like the inside of a gourd, and folded tightly upon itself everywhere in ridges pressed against each other. He would search through these for undigested leavings like himself, prying the folds apart and peering into the pocket behind. After a while the floor was littered with junk—a pair of old shoes, a traffic horn, a fishing rod, large clots of water plants, an empty tortoise shell, a wooden carving of an elephant playing a white saxophone, a glass eye and a wooden leg with matching monograms, a tin cup, a sepia daguerreotype of a toothless old man with a weedy beard

and a baggy ill-fitting suit, a pile of driftwood, a pink plastic Sphinx, a few magazines and newspapers, an axe, a dartboard, three small stone intaglios and an ivory cameo all with the same design, and a random assortment of bottles and cans.

Toward the rear end of the stomach, he could see the fish's previous victims lying stacked, one atop another, in lozenge-shaped pouches of semitransparent tissue attached to the wall. Most were people at varying stages of digestion. They all were lying on their backs, with their hands crossed on their chests, steaming off tiny plumes of white vapor as they dissolved. The pouches were cold to the touch, and the bodies seemed to be freezing as they withered and shrank. A few were almost totally gone, leaving only a rumpled set of clothes and a few twigs of ashy, unmetabolizable tissue. These were closest to the ceiling, leading him to believe that the sacs formed out of the floor and slowly ascended as their occupants were digested until finally being reabsorbed into the ceiling. Radiating out on all sides were thick, translucent screens of tissue stretched on frames of flexible bone. The zonate screens were patterned with irregular, rounded patches of gemlike color, separated by tiny gray ridges, and resembled stained glass. Occasionally, the Golem would glance up at the screens and catch sight of a spirit, presumably one of the victims', lingering behind one of the screens, close to its body. They had no color of their own, taking on whatever hue was projected on them from the screens, wavering in outline as they rippled across blobs of color. The Golem tried repeatedly to approach them, but they always fled—turning around the edge of the screen and vanishing. Sometimes, though, he would be resting quietly in some corner, and happen to look up for a moment, and he would see them standing nearby, watching him, their shadowy forms drooping and limp, their faces obscured by blank expressions. Several times, upon waking from a dream and finding himself still in the fish's stomach, he would detect a faint fragrance of orange flowers hovering around his face, as if someone, only a moment before, had exhaled it there. The smell would rapidly expand and fill the airless cavity, dispersing utterly in a few seconds—footsteps pad away, and then stop, abruptly.

Further to the front, the conduits converged around a ponderous domed chamber with mottled arcs of bone growing along the walls in symmetrical rows. The arcs were broad and serrated, and could be used as stairs to reach the braincase overhead. The walls were pink, marbled with wide bands of

white, and here the topaz lights hung on sinewy cords, of greatly varying lengths, that depended from the pendentives supporting the dome. It reminded him of the library at the Seminary, which had long curving staircases, heavily ornamented with cherubs holding scrolls and musical instruments. The place was also much like the Orpheum in San Veneficio. It was colder in here, although everything was visibly palpitating with slow, syncopated pulses emanating from above.

Up there, he could ride along on a shelf above the rear portions of the fish's brain, which pressed up against the edge of the shelf like a wall, curving away from him. An indentation at the bottom of this false wall revealed a crawl space down into the channel separating the brain's two hemispheres. He had gone down there only once—the intervening space between the two halves buzzed with a prickling low frequency that slammed against his head and chest like a lead weight, making him vibrate so that his outstretched hands blurred in and out of resolution, and his body felt ready to shake apart. He ducked back out again the next moment and kept his distance from then on. The atmosphere in the skull seemed even more rarefied than in the rest of the fish, and he found it difficult to remain there for any length of time. He would become dizzy, nauseated, and disoriented, and stagger down into the warmer, more habitable compartments further back.

He forced himself to return, however, because of the eyes. By slipping between the base of the horizontal occipital plate and the base of the skull, he could thread his way down into the fish's eye itself. It all but filled the wall of the socket—a thick convex lens as tall as he was. From the first moment he was fascinated by the view: a clammy, pitch-black projection of soft gelatin opening onto a featureless depth of empty water, stretching off into infinite distance. From time to time, uncanny, pallid lights of luminous fish would dart back and forth across his view, faintly illuminating for brief instants a drooping jaw of translucent, milky teeth, or another blank, impersonal fish eye staring back at him. After repeated viewings he realized that his host also could emit a feeble, greenish glow from tiny pits lining its body. These were "turned on" only when it was hovering over promontories of half-melted clay, where he assumed it fed. At those times he could see a weird lunar landscape outside—tall, wavy, vertical shelves of soapy dust-colored rock, sprouting grotesquely elongated antennae of coral, and motionless festoons of leathery, purple-green fronds like locks of hair.

There were usually no other fish around—the only mobile life were the pale brown hag-worms, that would lash their long, long bodies violently whenever his host cruised by, throwing off heavy webs of mucus as they attempted to burrow into the solid rock and out of sight. He and the fish would take no notice, however, and slip gigantically past.

Once he noticed an indistinct patch of white, gleaming dully in the dark surface of the eye, just at the periphery of his vision. At first he had taken it to be a reflection from one of the lights behind him, but, of course, it was the wrong color. As he realized this he saw it move. A woman's wan ragged form, staring past him, with yawning black pits where her eyes should be. She had taken a step forward, and now, as he stood watching her, she remained there, gazing past him from a few feet behind him—and behind her, a gap opening back deep into the bone and completely dark. Her eyes seemed like holes descending into the deeper darkness beyond. From time to time, something black would well out from them and ooze down her streaked face. It seemed that, at any moment, she might gesture to him—her sticklike arms swung a little back and forth as if she was preparing to fly forward at him with terrifying suddenness. And then her arms did fly up, her hands contorted like talons, and she plunged her long fingers into her eyes, the white ridges of her knuckles vanishing inside, rooting and clawing in the cavities and black ooze gushed down her stricken face, effacing it entirely against the darkness, and, the next moment, she had pushed herself backwards into the gap, and disappeared.

Long hours of watching out that eye's window, his hands resting lightly on its clear, cold, fleshy surface, had acclimatized him to the frigid atmosphere inside the skull. Now he loved to sit up there, especially on the shelf behind the brain, and watch the slow connections flare in bundles of silvery threads lining the base of the brain and ringing the occipital plate on all sides. The filaments would spark like downed power lines, and the Golem's features would flicker in and out of resolution in their light. Sometimes forms of some kind would half-emerge from the surface of the fish's brain, and he liked to watch them out of the corners of his eyes while staring blankly down at his feet in front of him (the attitude that, for him, passed for sleep). They never fully disentangled themselves and stepped out onto the shelf, but they did seem to fall for his phony sleep routine. As time went on they were getting more and more accustomed to him, and he saw them more often.

Once, when he was exploring, he came across a long fleshy wall punctuated at varying levels by tiny pockets of air, trapped on either side by thin, translucent membranes. By pressing his ear to them, he could hear sounds welling up from deep inside the fish, thrumming through them. He would return there often, at different times, to acquaint himself with all the many different sounds the fish made, depending on what it was doing. On one occasion, he was walking down the wall when a face came into view on the other side. It appeared in the window as if someone had been waiting, leaning up against the opposite wall, and then had rolled over to stare at him out of the black pits of its eyes. He looked more closely—its mouth was moving in its blurred face, expanding and contracting like a leech as it tried to speak with him. Its eyes stared and stared. He could hear its voice buzzing through the membrane. He edged closer and turned his head, both to hear it better and so as not to have to look at it. When it finished, he looked up, expecting the face to be gone. It was not.

Why did he stay? It was fully within his power at any time to leave. All he had to do was place his hand upon the Holy Book and whatever he needed would be given to him; he could sunder the fish apart and float to the surface safely, be conveyed on currents stirred by his own hand to the shore, and strike the city in half right down the middle, to hunt out Christine. Hand resting on the Book, he could command her to do anything, compel her to surrender herself, and she would have no choice. But he is somehow prevented—and this, and Ollimer, as an example—how is he prevented? In whose power is it to prevent him?

Over and over, this refrain cycles in his mind like a skipping needle, and enmeshed with it is his sense of Christine. Opposing stands his feeling that he can't act unless summoned to act by the story he is living. And that anything she was compelled to do would be worthless to him, divorced from her by want of consent. In amongst these thoughts he reviews their last encounter, whether she had sought him out to lure him deliberately into a trap, or to: what should he say—surrender to him, parlay with him, capture him; the sense is somewhere in the overlap of them all. If she had meant to finally permit him to catch her, then why wear the mask that made it impossible? But still, he felt she meant him to catch her. He could never catch her without her consent, and while he could compel her even to consent, that nevertheless did not constitute “catching” her. The hide-and-seek waited on her leisure to end, and for that he would have to satisfy her

of his patience. But if he did prove his patience, she would willingly come from her hiding place and give her consent to be caught. Everything, for him, depended on that. So he stayed, and did nothing. But was she going to send for him? He knew she could sense him down there, but was she expecting him to escape for himself?

In the end he thought of nothing but her, feebly hoping that somehow the constancy of his concentration would make him more difficult for her to ignore. Perpetually exhausted by all this thinking, he retired to the lower, darker chambers. There was a sort of pale, whitish egg-shaped room that he liked—he guessed it was superfluous and that the fish never used it. There were attenuated conical indentations in the puffy ceiling, supported at the top by rings of bone that held them open to the lighted cavity overhead, like skylights. He would collapse in one of the bright circles of light under one such skylight in the middle of the room and lie there, half-propped against the wall, with his legs sticking out in front of him and his heavy coat bulging out above his shoulders and around his head—thinking about Christine.

Consistent effort is its own best camouflage. It's only in moments of repose that one realizes how expensive it is, especially when there's nothing to show for it. The Golem was subject to intermittent palpitations of piercing longing and sentimentality, to stagger woundedly up to Christine, and she would finally hold out her arms to him, and he could finally permit himself to collapse, having her to support him. She would buoy him up on her own warmth and breath, and when he thought of her he felt tortured and frantic. As time went by his exhaustion deepened and he allowed nervous helplessness to seep in. At his lowest point, he reached into his coat pocket and laid his fingers thoughtlessly on the torn cover of his Book.

Instantly she was there, right at the border of the circle of light in which he was sitting. She was lying on her side, with her upper body raised, supported by her hands, one flat on the floor behind her and the other poised on its fingers in front of her, as if he had stretched out an invisible hand, swept her up out of the city and tossed her down again here. He stared at her, not yet completely aware of what was happening. She was disheveled and shocked.

“You’re not going to *cheat*, are you?” she cried.

Christine was only dimly visible in the half-light. She was pale and her face was framed by her dark, unruly hair so that it seemed to hover over her

black dress. Her face was gleaming, and her features were shadowed as if they were folds in a single sheet of light. A shiny string of black buttons bisected her down the middle.

“How *dare* you bring me here!” she cried dramatically.

He took his hand away from the Book resignedly.

She vanished.

There are props constructed to simulate banks of tiny lights, but that are actually just rows of holes in a board with a single lightbulb burning behind them. Individual holes may be covered with tiny panes of tinted glass or plastic, but the “lights” are really only one, plain light. When that bulb is extinguished, they all disappear. The Golem was manufactured by design—he wouldn’t attempt to destroy a desire when he could simply destroy himself. So he winked out, and all his desires vanished, too. His fingers had relaxed and released the Book, and without bothering to see if she was still there, he pulled his hand from his pocket and let it fall with the other in his lap, letting his head droop down onto his chest.

He had noticed one ghost in particular that seemed to be actively trying to attract his attention. It was a figure so eroded by time that he was unable to determine in it even the vestiges of its sex, circling around one corner of the long, low chamber with the skylights, where Christine had appeared to him. Unfortunately, even when he became fully aware that it was trying to communicate something to him, it was so exhausted and dissipated that its message never reached him complete. The best it could manage was a series of apparently unrelated, attenuated pantomimes, but even this trivial effort cost it so much that its gray, flimsy substance was stretched to almost invisible thinness, and the Golem found it hard to distinguish the spirit’s form from the background. Eventually, however, he came to know its schedule well enough to anticipate its appearance, and he would stand as close as possible and in such a way as to block the light from behind him, so that the ghost would be in his shadow, easier to see.

It would come then, preceded by dashing blows of vindictive, biting cold that spun out in horizontal arcs like the folds of a whirlpool from the spot where it was about to materialize. The next moment, it would appear as if it were being extruded from between the crushing weight of two dimensions into the limitless vampiric emptiness of three. The Golem would have to wait for it to pick up his presence, often for as long as half an hour, even though he was standing directly in front of it (as far as he could tell). Then

it would instantly begin again the chain of inexplicable motions that it seemed so urgently to want him to decipher, but which were so vague that the Golem was unable to make out anything but a repeated cluster of similar hand motions, where it flapped its fingers and made a pincer of its two palms. All the while, it teetered back and forth as if it were standing on the deck of a ship, or an unstable chair. This would go on for something like an hour, then it would simply unravel before his eyes, as if unable to hold together any longer, still trying to repeat the same feeble gestures.

The Golem watched this display with increasing boredom and indifference until it occurred to him to search the spot where the ghost routinely appeared. He found a rumpled magazine concealed from sight in a pit in the tissue that had subsequently collapsed, creating a pouch in the floor. The ghost never bothered him again, so he assumed this was what he had been intended to find.

The only thing in the magazine worthy of notice was a short fairy tale which went as follows:

“When Y was still very young she lived in a kingdom in the forest that was ruled by a Prince and Princess who were so similar that they could have been brother and sister. Their greatest passion was hunting, and together they would ride hard behind the hounds regardless of what the quarry might be, their eyes and teeth glistening like diamonds in the smooth, glowing planes of their pale faces. Their lances were so sharp they left a wake of severed branches and boughs behind them, cleanly cut without so much as a tug on the haft as they coursed past, holding them so that the blades hovered inches only above the ground. Their horses had been bred from horses and deer to make them as lithe and nimble in the heavy timber as they could be, and the Princess’s mount in particular, which had two small velveted buds of horn, the size of walnuts, sprouting just below its ears. On one such occasion, the Prince nearly impaled Y on his lance, coming across her unexpectedly in the path of the hunt. She had been wandering on her own for days and was very weak and tired. The Prince swept her from the ground onto his horse with a single swing of his arm and carried her back to the royal pavilion, where he and his Princess would stay when they were hunting.

“The Princess and Prince both were enchanted with Y, and they looked after her as best they could. They gave her some food and drink, encouraging her to eat as much as possible, but they kept her talking to

them and walking around the campsite when more sensible people would have realized she should have been permitted to sleep, being close to dropping with exhaustion. Y was so disoriented herself that she did not manage to tell them how tired she was.

“The two sovereigns passed the night telling Y the story of how they met, but she was too tired to really pay much attention. One of them had certainly come from a long way off, either searching for the other or at the other’s request, and indeed it turned out they were related, although in what way she couldn’t remember. Dawn broke unexpectedly, and in a flash they were up on their horses again, with Y riding behind the Princess in the same saddle. The Princess’s body was fragrant and warm, soft even in its tight lacings and sturdy dress—unlike the Prince, who was all solid and hard as ice. Y slept fitfully with her arms around the Princess’s waist and her head cushioned on the Princess’s soft back. At one point, she asked the Prince, who was riding near, what they were hunting. He shouted back that there was a criminal in the vicinity who had been terrorizing the citizens, a kidnapper, murderer, and thief. From the Prince’s description Y got the impression that this criminal was something of a rebel general or usurper noble as well, with designs on the kingdom.

“A little while later, Y awoke to the sound of horns and a sudden jolting as the horse underneath her started forward at a full gallop. The dogs were baying in long, reverberating yelps that hung in the shimmering spaces between the trees. It was sunset, and the forest was swimming in a thick, golden light that made the buzzing midges and motes of dust look like flecks of gold swirling in the hot, soporific air. The sun itself emitted jabbing lances of light that stabbed into her eyes and made her squint, so that all she could see were tenebrous silhouettes with faint patches of color, as if she had a screen in front of her eyes. Apparently, they were catching up to the usurper. Like a reply, she suddenly jerked back at the sound of a scream from somewhere nearby. She looked around one side of the Princess’s back, and at the same moment felt a jolt run down the Princess’s other side, and there was a scream, exactly like the first, from right in front of them. She switched sides and saw a figure tumbling to the ground in tall grass between the trees in a small open space.

“The Prince and the Princess came together and began speaking eagerly to one another. From what she could make out, it seemed to Y that they had been chasing the usurper in different directions, and both claimed to have

killed him. Then they dismounted, and the Prince took her by the hand, and the Princess's hand as well, and they all went together to look at the body. The Prince released her and knelt, while the Princess held her shoulders as if to force her to look. But when the Prince turned the figure over, it was a wooden dummy.

“Look!” the Prince said, with no more wonder in his voice than if he'd just noticed something interesting in the newspaper. ‘It's not a person at all. It's not even alive.’

“Nevertheless, they tied it to the Princess's horse and dragged it back to the pavilion. There the royal soldiers and attendants charred it in a fire, spitting on it and ridiculing it. After a while, Y could make out another sound murmuring below the insults of the soldiers. She listened closely and determined that it was the dummy, speaking. It was soliloquizing in a faint but steady voice that it was unvanquished, that it would take over the kingdom regardless of setback, that it would overwhelm them all, and so forth, on and on, in a continuous drone. The soldiers shredded its clothes, they tore out its hair, they spattered it with mud, and shat on it, and then threw it into a cart. Then Y noticed that the other attendants were packing away the last of the pavilion and camping equipment. She asked the Prince, who had been standing behind her, running his fingers through her hair, where they were going, and he replied that they were returning to the royal mansion, and that she was coming with them.

“The sun was setting again as they arrived at the mansion. It was a simple, square, stone building of two stories, sitting in the middle of a small, circular island, surrounded by a wide moat. A narrow ribbon of packed clay linked the island with the outer bank. As the servants filed into the building, Y stood by the walls of the mansion, watching the soldiers across the moat dumping the usurper, still soliloquizing, into the water. They tipped the cart up, and he slid slowly under the surface, vanishing altogether. The soldiers disappeared into the forest.

“Y looked up. She was alone on the bank with the Princess. The setting sun dazzled her, creating a flaming corona around the Princess's head, making her eyes appear to burn like hot coals, and her gleaming, sharp teeth spangle the air with white gleams. She explained that she and her brother looked nothing like what Y now saw, that in fact the two of them never left the mansion at all, being disfigured and not entirely mobile—her brother more than herself—so they resorted to projecting pleasing images of

themselves outside the house, and so were able to live their lives vicariously. Now the Princess asks Y if she wants to come inside and see them as they really are, and Y says *NO!* The black door of the house opens wide and the Princess takes Y forcibly by the arm and pulls her in through the door, or tries to, with Y clinging to the door frame with all her strength, and pleading not to be taken inside.

“Copyright XXXX by Christine Dalman—dedicated to you know who.”

The Golem puts down the magazine and starts instantly out of the chamber, heading up to the fish’s head again. He makes his way through the cold receding galleries as if a magnet was pulling him forward to the fish’s eye—and, once there, he looks out, but he doesn’t see anything. Turning around, he looks about the small cavity behind the eye, and then notices something flashing on the floor as he moves back and forth—an irregularly shaped spot of dim light, which he saw interrupted by his shadow as he passed back and forth before the eye. He drops to the floor and lays his head in the patch to trace the source of the light—it is coming from a very faint wavering expanse overhead, the surface, it’s moonlight.

It’s time to go. He runs back through the gap across the room and up into the braincase. With effort he forces himself down into the crevasse between the two hemispheres, his body buzzing in the low, gray thrumming force that arcs around him. He thrusts a hasty finger down his throat and disgorges a palmful of formaldehyde, smearing it on his hands; he then thrusts them deep into the walls of tissue on either side of him. The formaldehyde sinks down into the brain cells, darkening and spreading threads of embalmed nerves down into the fish’s spine and along its control centers.

Suddenly, the thrumming abates, or no it doesn’t abate at all but it changes character, because now it’s behind him, and supporting him, like a locomotive pushing a train car, and he feels falling away from him on all sides the massive life of the fish in its cavernous organs and huge slow processes of bones and muscles. He can feel himself hanging suspended in a limitless void of icy black water that seems to move around him, not to be a medium to be moved through, as if he were absolutely still. Above all he can feel a kind of cold outside and a different, more active cold inside—a cold in which is nested a torpid will that vectors through the water. With the sense of turning a vast ship, he directs it to vector him up. Slowly, the fish begins angling its barn-sized head upwards, and he can feel its body

creaking and protesting against the lightness of the pressure and the proximity of the dry air overhead. He guides it up and over toward the shore, the dim pilings of the deep-sunk piers of the city coming into view, like a forest of iron bars losing itself in the distance. The mucky slope of the shore comes into view now, and he opens his mouth wide and lets go, and water floods in as he flings himself backwards, down out of the skull and further down through into the gullet and a raging black surging of water gushing out, sluicing him from the gaping jaws of the fish as it backs out of the shallows and turns away, shocked and bewildered. Tumbling end over end he disappears in the water and a current that carries him toward the land.

He feels his body undulating forward on the waves, the water tapping against his eardrum. The air above him is dark and still, and he can hear the water lapping against stone walls on all sides as he comes in, floating on his back. Then candles begin to glow somewhere ahead of him, and around him, the flames start from embers and then grow to steady, unwavering fires, each with its own powdery ball of amber light, emanating from it. He can see now the walls of the chapel encompassing him, striped with shadows from the slender pillars upon which rest the Gothic arches that rib the ceiling. The Golem is being washed diagonally, feet first, across the floor and up the nave toward the altar. Gliding and spinning slightly, he flows over the smooth backs of the pews like worn river stones, colliding with the floating hymnals and prayer books. As he drifts further in, he can see the night-dulled colors of the stained-glass windows slipping past, and the bowed and veiled head of the statue of the Virgin in mourning, flanked by two gallant saints with flowing golden beards, protecting her from a group of menacing brown bears. The force of the torrent spins him slowly around on the surface of the waves, and he can see the candles lighting themselves along the length of the nave, their lights reflecting serenely on the agitated surface of the water.

As he turns around again, he can see that the Virgin has the Magician's face, and that she is looking at him from under her veil, smiling. The water stills, and she stares at him with her golden eyes, smiling. The Golem stops drifting and hangs motionless in front of the altar, and the formaldehyde permeating his clothes and skin spreads out in a film on the water. And from beneath the tombstones and markers, where the dead lie buried beneath the paving stones, tiny crumbs of earth are buoyed through the

cracks and seams, floating up to the surface, rolling toward the Golem, and as they emerge they begin to shine like fireflies, drawn to the surface and to the Golem. Soon he is haloed with shining motes in the formaldehyde, and one by one they transmit to him the sibilant, humming voices from beneath the stones, buoying him up with noiseless resonation like a thrumming gust, pushing him up, and suddenly the water goes as clear as crystal and the ground and pavings beneath, and he can see them all lying in their graves in the dim orange light from the candles, reaching gently down the iron stalks of their stands and playing a gleam of false life across lifeless features lying supine only a few feet below him, and they are looking at him, smiling. The water is dripping down onto them through the transparent lids of their coffins, and all the while they gaze at him, smiling. And rising in him the same feeling makes him fall back into the water noiselessly, smiling, shining with the wan twilight phosphorescence of motes of grave dirt dissolving in formaldehyde, and painting his body with their eerie, sourceless, blue-green chemical light, and he rolls over in the water, staring down directly into something collapsed, blackened eyes gaping up out of a smudged face in a rectangular coffin, and then he rolls back upright again, and the windows lining one side of the church are blazing with sunlight and, on the other side, the windows have gone transparent, revealing a cobalt-blue sky with twinkling stars and a vast, full, white-and-grey moon. The pillars have become columns, carved in the likeness of gigantic reeds, and the stained-glass tableaux depict smooth-contoured profiles of caramel-colored figures in white linen and pharaoh's masks, and likewise the Virgin is wearing Christine's shining mask of blue and gold, and her guardian saints stare out at him through the eyes of a hawk's head, and a dog's head.

THE CATECHISM AND THE TEN PLAGUES

From the causeway where she is standing, she can see him far below, crossing the square (it's actually a broad rectangular bridge connecting two large buildings, with a round planter in the middle). He lurches to and fro among the ghosts, who take no notice of him. She thinks a moment, and then from her purse she pulls a pair of binoculars which she raises smoothly to her face.

He jerks into focus and simultaneously stops walking. Even from this distance she can see the whites of his eyes flashing as he looks around, sensing her, trying to see where she is. In a moment he's going to glance up and notice her, and then his eyes will pounce on hers like an arrow shot along her line of sight—she quickly pulls from her purse, which is resting on the railing, an antique stereo viewer. With a steady hand she brings it into position under the binoculars, then very gradually begins to raise the viewer's frames up over the lenses, slipping the glass panels of the slides carefully underneath him, like scooping a spider up off the floor with the edge of a sheet of paper. Now the stereo viewer's panes completely cover the lenses—she drops the binoculars back into her purse without moving the viewer from her face.

He's wandering around in the viewer slide now, disoriented. The scene is a sepia-tinted museum gallery, near the wall, with a gargantuan doorway looming next to him. Titanic people glide by like icebergs, women in antique gowns passing with the rustling of silk skirts, a rustling amplified to him like the roaring of waves, and men tapping by with walking sticks the size of pier pilings. (At this distance the scale of the slide wasn't in exact correspondence with his size in perspective.) She adjusts the viewer, focusing the scene behind him like a rear-projection screen, and the next moment he's full size. He is slithering along the wall, craning his head in all directions, looking either for her or the exit. He can feel her nearby—she takes her eyes away and examines the slide from behind: a tiny figure, more like a man-shaped smear, creeps along the surface of the glass, hovering over it, separated from the slide by an invisible meniscus of surface tension

in three dimensions. If she is careful, she can slip a different slide underneath him, then remove the old one and raise the viewer back to the light again, changing the scene.

With care she selects a park in San Veneficio and eases it into the slot in front of the museum slide. Then she whips out the museum slide with a flick of her ring and little fingers and brings the viewer back up to her eyes.

The Golem is standing on the outskirts of the park, just by the gate, blinking and rubbing his eyes at the sudden burst of preserved daylight. The moment he's able to see, he appears to recognize instantly where he is, and he darts through the wrought-iron gates and down the wide gravel path, threatening at any moment to vanish among the trees and bushes. He's moving fast, right along the edge of the grass. The pedestrians in the park drift unhurriedly down the lane, pay him no mind. Without taking her eyes off him, Christine's fingers flick smartly through the box of slides in her bag, plucking out another shot of the same park from further toward the center, including the same path the Golem is now taking. She holds it aloft over the viewer and waits. She waits without wavering or moving a muscle, smiling, enjoying herself patiently, watching his form shrinking, skulking at the verge of the path with his loping, crippled walk. Suddenly he drops neatly away to the right behind a sepia bush and disappears. Without losing a moment she drops the next slide into place and withdraws the first all in one continuous motion, and suddenly she can see him again, in the distance, weaving back and forth in the shrubs, trying not to be seen. She watches him coming, and as she does she has the strange idea that, although he is definitely coming toward her, his form appears to be dwindling away exactly as if he was moving away from her. Angling the viewer slightly from side to side, she notices that she can rotate her little window on the scene a full circle by turning around in place. At a roughly forty-five degree angle from his general position he seems to be approaching again—the shrinking effect is gone. Satisfied, she watches him coming slowly closer, hampered by his exaggerated strategy for not being seen. From time to time he stops completely, and his head swivels in all directions, trying to find her eyes. Every time, and the closer he gets, he seems to be guessing with greater and greater accuracy, and becoming harder to see as a consequence, since he is beginning to figure out in which direction he should cover himself.

He steps out from behind a tree into the square. She studies him intently, all at once he's not trying to hide anymore. Instead, he walks across to the fountain and stands with one hand resting on its lip, staring into it. The fountain is made of clear glass and its bottom rests on a huge kaleidoscope, flashing colored lights up from underneath through the water to spatter the trees and the faces of pedestrians with tiny panels of colored light, oozing into each other and refracting out of each other. Hovering motionless in the center of the pool is a freshwater octopus, shifting color and pattern to match the kaleidng from beneath, but always a little delayed, so that the last image lingers a moment above its replacement before fading altogether, never to be repeated, like a visual memory complete in one moment. The Golem's eyes are fixed on the octopus. They stand there a moment, his eyes on it, her eyes on him, the octopus standing still in the middle of the fountain, the Golem standing still at the edge, and Christine standing still by the railing with her viewer.

Then the Golem reaches into his pocket, eyes unwavering, and produces a small tin box. He opens the box and pulls out something brown and glistening—it looks like a shred of liver. With two fingers he tosses it into the water. The octopus extends a languid tentacle and plucks it up before it touches the bottom, curling it toward its beak, underneath. Christine looks more closely—what is he up to? The Golem suddenly thrusts his head under the water. She can see his mouth moving, distorted by the curved glass wall of the fountain into a wide black stain, evidently giving instructions to the octopus. She rocks a little back, feels the reins being tugged from her hands . . .

The octopus turns toward her. It can see her. It can draw her out of herself, as a favor to the Golem. In a moment the patterns change to splotched purple and yellow across its hide and everything around her goes dark except for a patch of light across the upper half of her face, across her eyes, where curling patterns of purple and yellow spangle her cheeks and glitter like embers reflected in her golden eyes. The colors get more intense and deepen, as if they'd been hollowed out and filled with light like paper lanterns, until her eyes are overflowing with them and they run down her cheeks in streaks of white-hot silver. She leans back as if a chasm had opened at her feet, but she's still falling forward, looking down at the scene in the viewer now and seeing the aperture between his hovering figure and the slide, and watching that aperture gape wide, and feeling it swing round

like a frame in a revolving door, without the glass, flashing past her and swallowing her up, toppling past a mirror frame into the picture. She turns around and then it's light again—but dimmer, domesticated light—she's not where she was.

The room is enormous, with a high domed roof over her head, and the city spread out far below, visible through the many small windows, small enough to be out of proportion with the wall. A hallway with a window and stairwell at the end stretches off in front of her. The viewer's gone—she's been sucked inside it. She turns around, looking at the roof, the pillars supporting it sprouting in the corners, turning toward the unusually high elevated stage at the far end.

The Golem is standing on the stage. It's incredible—he's smiling at her! They stare at each other a moment. Then, with slow deliberation, he takes a step toward her, on the short flight of steps from the stage. She is so surprised that she can think of nothing better to do than turn and run as fast as she can down the hall.

From where he stands he sweeps the head of his cane across her feet (in perspective) and she is whipped to the floor, landing flat on her stomach, knocking the wind out of her—the gold mask flies off and out of her face and skitters across the floor. Breathless, she scrambles out onto the landing after it, pinwheeling her arms through the bars of the banister after it shoots through them, watching it ricochet off an open windowsill and go spinning off into the shadows, flicking spangles of reflected gold onto brick walls and darkened windows, plummeting down the shaft toward the black waters of the lake below. She runs down the steps to the window and pokes out her head in time to see the mask wink once more in the light before vanishing between the gaping jaws of a massive fish. It stares blankly up at her for a moment before sinking into deep water again with a faint gurgling sound.

The Golem's coming—slow, regular, ponderous footfalls. She turns without looking up and steps out onto the lower landing. Then she takes the next step more quickly, and then another and another until she's running down the stairs.

The stairs stop. She bounds down and finds nothing but floor where the well ought to continue. Overhead, the stairs creak slowly and regularly, a measured, heavy tread. She ducks out the door into the hall, heading for the stairwell on the opposite side of the building.

#1.) Hanged Men: She's almost through the doorway when all the doors lining the hall crash to the floor. As she crosses, a long silhouette swings up from the near right-hand doorway momentarily barring her path, bobbing on a gust of wind from the window in the room—a pair of legs, one with a brace, tied together at the ankles, swinging back into the room attached to a figure in a long black coat, with his hands tied behind his back, hanging from the ceiling just inside the door—there's one in every doorway, swinging back and forth on creaking ropes. Their heads are hooded with demure pink satin bags cinched tight around their necks, just inside the noose. She starts forward again but the roof splinters apart just above and ahead of her and more of them come slamming down directly blocking her way—she can hear the click of their necks snapping as the ropes crack taut like whips, but they're still twisting and jerking weakly back and forth, strangling. Behind her, Christine can hear the Golem creaking down the stairs and into the hall after her. She elbows the hanging men aside and pushes forward, but a whole broadside of gallows trapdoors burst open along the ceiling and more of them drop down snapping their necks, and their chins flop down flat on their chests, cocking their heads too far on either side: one after another but all more or less at the same time, the bound feet swinging down and bouncing back, all the same. She has to wade in among them, shoving them out on either side like a little girl forcing her way back into a closet full of heavy coats and stinking of mold and rot . . . The way they jerk and swing she can hardly pass between them. She's almost to the fire escape—she looks behind her: as the Golem approaches the hanging bodies around him whip sideways to let him pass, like hotel doormen or a phalanx of synchronized dancers, and he creeps through, spiderlike with his cane and an evilly patient expression on his face. Now she's at the stairs—bolts down to the next floor and once again stops short at a blank expanse of concrete between her and the floor below. She barges out into the hall heading for the opposite stairwell like before.

#2.) Laboratory Specimens: This time the hall doors have been removed in advance, and in each doorway a different body falls swooning to the floor with exaggerated slowness. Gigantic fetal pigs, foals, calves, lambs, chicks, ducklings, monitor lizards, chimpanzees, etc., so large that each fills the room it's in, and swells as its head drifts past the doorframe and splats to the floor. Their tongues flap between their slack jaws or loll out one side of their mouths, their eyes are partially collapsed and scummed with white

film, their flesh is gray and clammy and stinks of formaldehyde: each is already slit open down the front with two symmetrical flaps, exposing multicolored shapes with gleaming contours, that spill out across the floor in voluptuously spreading pools of blood and rubbing alcohol. As their heads hit the floor, perfectly circular sheets of stinking gray-brown fluid flow out from them evenly into the hall. Running from the Golem, Christine is involuntarily jarred backward—the specimens' blood bonds her feet to the floor like glue. Grabbing her leg, she tries to yank it free, and, meeting with no success, she is forced to spit around her shoes: the blood foams on contact with her acidic saliva and her foot comes free. From then on she is forced to weave in and out of the pools, finally hopscotching wildly as patches of dry floor become more rare. All the while the bodies are swelling, the heads in particular, forcing her to leap around them as well, and finally to clamber over them as best she can, slipping awkwardly on their cold, oozing flesh and sodden hair or feathers.

The level of rotted blood on the floor is rising—she has to jump from head to head to get to the stairwell, where a low glass riser prevents the blood from spilling down to the next floor. If she falls in, she'll be stuck forever in blood amber. Behind her, the Golem is following effortlessly, if slowly, walking on the surface of the blood.

#3.) Mold: From where she is standing, the light filters in through the opposite window through floating threads of spores, like tiny hooks sequenced on a line. They undulate together in minute drafts, forming semivisible banners crisscrossing each other along the length of the hall, and in and out of the open rooms. More threads, finer than hair, ooze up from volcanic mounds of livid fungus heaped across the floor. Still more fungus creeps up the walls in ladders and gills and leprous stalagmites, and hangs in stubby icicles from the ceiling. In the rooms, it forms chains of gold and gray ringing the walls, chandeliers of pliant, clear puffballs strung together like bulbs of blown glass, and pastel-colored cocoons that hatch violet fireflies and hummingbirds whose wings are green and red and white, and who trail an exhaust of rust-colored spores. And here and there, people, looking half-melted, waving and murmuring, rooted to the floor, with rolling puffball eyes and cheeks rouged with blue and green molds.

Her first breath of the air in here clogs her throat like a wad of dry tissue paper. A mildewy stink, mingled with a rancid, meaty odor, flutters up from corrugated, fleshy funnels and veiny platters sprouting from the

wainscoting. Clamping her hand over her lips, she struts disgustedly out onto the floor heading for the opposite stairway, as usual. But each step kicks up puffs of spores that rustle up the sides of her dress and begin tracing tiny filaments across her hands and face, like a butcher's map sectioning a carcass into cuts. A buzzing sensation starting behind her nose, in her sinuses, begins creeping back into her skull, and in an instant she feels the channels that connect her brain to her body being dammed, one after another. An indolent, pulsing, numb feeling spreads up her body, her momentum crashes down around her ankles and she begins to weave back and forth, dragging her feet through more spore fronds and kicking up thicker and thicker ropes of spores that weave her up and down with tacky orange webs hovering a few millimeters above her skin.

Like waves pounding lazily down on her, she feels herself losing balance, a bloated desire to topple over backwards and sleep, would sense the mold first only as a momentary itch, followed by cool relief as it spreads and anesthetizes, neatly choking off the nerves like a gardener pulling weeds. In a matter of moments she would be sheathed in a safe, cool, fleshy envelope of lurid orange, blue, and purple patches further ornamenting her with fat leathery flowers and mushroom heads on long stalks like dangling lotus blossoms. Meandering in and out of one room after another, each with its own distinct color and texture now, where all was identical before, stumbling and drooping more and more as strings of spore feed into her nostrils and corkscrew into her ears, powdering her face and hands pale blue, and she totters to the Golem's metronomic tread. He's there in the doorway, but the spores don't bother him—the moment they land on his tainted flesh they shrivel and steam with formaldehyde poisoning. Even his shoes leave blackened scorch marks on the springy floor.

Christine collects herself for an instant and thinks to drop one blue hand into her purse, from which she pulls a perfume bottle. She splatters it liberally on her face and hands, pulling off sheets of powdery blue lint melting in the perfume. Then she drops the bottle to the floor, shattering it on a fortuitously exposed bit of tile, and the coils of alcohol and perfume slither up in a cloud around her body, melting the spores and tangling the floating filaments up in impenetrable knots that drop to the ground twisting. The shock of the smell knifes through the buzzing in her head and she is able to reorient herself. She wipes her feet in the spreading stain, soaking her shoes thoroughly, meanwhile clearing blue tears from her golden eyes

with her handkerchief, and then trips quickly down the hall and out into the stairwell, walking in a golden flame of perfume. The Golem is only a few yards behind.

#4.) Ghosts: The moment her foot crosses the threshold, everything goes pitch-black. Silence. No motion. No odor in the air. No temperature. No sense of the stairs behind her or the floorboards stretching out before her. The walls are invisible, and the rooms beyond visible only as patches of denser darkness against the dark. Without realizing it, she's taken several steps out into the middle. The sensation of her feet touching the floor becomes more and remote, as if she were elongating up through the ceiling. But everywhere the darkness is humming, as though permeated by tingling nerves. It engulfs her without absorbing her, so that while the borders between all other things become blurred and intermixed, she and the dark stay discrete.

Nothing is preventing her from stealing down to the other stairs, but she's wary to move, suspecting that she will begin to dissolve into the dark if she tries. But of course she's moving already, walking up and down in front of the doors first on one side, then on the other. But from high atop her shoulders, looking down at where her feet must be, far below, she feels she's only sailing along without effort. One by one she picks out the luminous figures that honestly were there all along. They shine with such diffused radiance that at least at first they're barely perceptible, but each appears to be brightening slowly, with each new pass, emerging at increments out of the dark.

As they come out, Christine recognizes who they are. It would be wrong to distinguish between them, they're all the same. Each is doing something in its own room, illuminating the few sticks of furniture collapsed in corners and casting dimly discernible shadows with their own light. They're pantomiming old routines, fixed in time to such an extent that their every motion has already become a circular preparation for the next repetition. As Christine recognizes them, she begins to hear them, baffled voices both reminiscent of her own and completely strange speaking fragments, coming to the door of the room and throwing up both hands, fingers drooping onto the palms, "... It can't ..." a voice from the corner, saying, "... famine ..." and other rooms, "... find me ..." and, becoming aware of her, "... but, I ..." and, coming up behind her, "... not for any ..." muffled as if they were speaking through coffin lids. Sailing past the doors,

she picks up every scrap and feels her court assembling around her on all sides. She stops in the middle again.

One of them draws very near. She floats silently forward, hesitates, then glides up, superimposing her immaterial skirt over Christine's. An indolent, numb feeling soaks into her right leg, and then she's barely conscious of it anymore. Her eyelids droop, but then a moment later she jerks them open and looks—circular powdery blue-black holes in a blue-white face smiling idiotically with its powdery smudge of a mouth only inches from her face, and her leg dislocated, numb and immobile, that this one is wearing like a stocking on her own ghost leg. Around her, on all sides, there are others like this one, straining eagerly forward to ease in through the other leg, or an arm, to seize on her and dress themselves in her body. Feverishly, to fend them off, she thinks to bang herself hard against the floor, but she can't collapse—her right leg won't bend or tip. So instead she stomps on the floor with her left leg, jarring her up to her teeth, and flails out her arms, trying to smack them against the walls. She suffers to stay awake, and all the while a crude copy of her face grins oblivious at her, freezing her right leg to the ground. Finally, in a fit of desperation, she seizes the icy throat and squeezes it shut. The expression on the other face does not change, but for a moment it seems to be turning a darker shade of blue. The mouth opens a little and emits a mewling, gurgling sound in a ready caricature of her voice. Christine shakes it violently by the throat. The shade appears to elongate a little, as if her head were trying to float off her neck, snapping back and forth. She's not sure what happens next—perhaps it slips? Suddenly pins and needles shatter up and down her leg and she's free.

Turning away a moment she can see the hallway stretching off into the distance, but now it blurs, turning into a bridge. The walls vanish, and a narrow lake appears, flanking her on both sides. The stairwell has become a flight of steps where the bridge becomes an elevated walkway over the opposite bank. The ceiling is now a concrete dome, large enough to span an entire city, lit with colorless light evenly shining across its surface. The air is sharp and cold.

More of them straggle in front of her, closing around her, a knot sliding closed. They reach for her with coy, timid gestures, pressing in to touch her. Behind her, there is nothing but an opaque wall of shadow, where the bridge trails off hanging in nothingness, no way out. She glances down at the water

—it looks deathly cold and blue, poisoned. Finally, she simply throws up her arms and dashes between them, twisting sideways to avoid their hands.

In the middle of the bridge, she turns to see if they are following her—they're not. They're waiting. Christine stops, breathing hard, and watches them, straining her ears—what holds them back? One by one they come apart in fragments like silver dandelion heads, pulverizing into beads of white down that drift away to either side. Candles in squat blue bells of frosted glass float across the water, set in motion by long, graceful hands that retreat into gem-encrusted portholes in the bank, just above the waterline, their fingers weighted with heavy rings, wrists by pendulous bracelets, all set with big precious stones. Some of the candles drift lazily toward her, others race in straight lines raising tiny wakes behind them, only to halt perfectly still a few yards away from her. In their blue light that turns everything blue, she can see that the lake isn't water at all, but raw mercury, heaving and shuddering like a living thing, throwing azure flashes back up at her.

A sound draws her attention back to the bridge. Standing where the shades had been, there is a black coach and team. The horses are black, and their skeletons have been painted on their bodies in thick streaks of white phosphorus. They have black plumes sprouting from their heads, but no bit nor bridle, no reins, because no coachman. She hesitates a moment longer, and then the horses and the front of the coach fade to transparency a moment, as if a jagged hole had been cut through them both, revealing the interior of the carriage. The Golem is in there, staring straight at her from his seat. His spectacles glint like a pair of dusty lamps as he leans almost imperceptibly forward. Then the vision fades, the horses and carriage reappear as before—the horses snort and start forward, rattling across the bridge toward her. She loses no time, but bolts up the stairs at the other end.

Here the bridge spans a pair of tracks in a narrow gorge. As she runs across, a train rushes past not more than five feet below, and she glances down, still running, the windows flashing by. Inside they all are staring back, their eyes wide open, their mouths open and toothless in a sort of senile, fumbling expression, with their hands in their laps, strobing past all in the same posture as the train roars by behind her. As its noise dies down, she can hear the coach battering up the stairs to the causeway.

A path corkscrews among the trees, and after only a few steps she's lost. Overhead, densely interlaced branches scribble out the cavern-roof sky, and

as she runs the trunks crowd in close on all sides, until she's practically moving through a tunnel—and then again, in moments a vista will open to one side or the other, revealing trees the size of cathedrals, with a span of branches big enough to shadow a small town—an underground forest. Spiders the size of barns rattle by on legs like oil derricks, monkeys swing from tree to tree in barking shoals. Malachite branches and scored trunks of granite and basalt, limestone and porphyry, sheathed in coats of pumice moss and ivy vines of soft lead, and wide beds of zinc grass. Minute flakes of plagioclase feldspar sprinkle down from the boughs like dew and collect on the path in a thick layer of fine dust that billows in moon-colored transparent clouds behind her footsteps. Strange piping and chirping noises come shouting out of the darkness like birds being throttled, and others like the voices of parrots, ravens, or mynahs trained to speak by raving psychotics. They seem to be hunting her down, circling closer like bloodhounds. She gets a good look at one as it hops onto a branch hanging over the path ahead—it's actually a sort of clockwork, assembled around a small plastic figurine of a saint, with porcelain bird's legs emerging from its knees, tin tailfeathers from the base jutting behind, wings on either side of the gears and cogs that protrude from its spine, and a painted metal beak affixed to its face, which opens and closes to utter shrill, distorted cries and queerly accented nonsense in the voice of a pull-string doll. More of them cluster all around her as she runs down the path, babbling incomprehensible words and groaning. The coach is still following her, ignoring the path, cutting toward her in a straight line. She watches as it vanishes behind a root the size of a train car, and then appears again, mounting over the top and driving straight down the side perpendicular to the ground, the horses walking downward and clinging to the root like flies, then bending backwards parallel to the ground once more to continue pursuing her. Around her she can see the Golem's skeleton reproduced in different sizes, the bones of the largest thrusting up among the trees in pallid and cracked columns, the ground littered with his bones, and leaping, yawping corpses flashing in the heather under swinging lightbulbs that hang from long cords from the trees, kicking up clouds of fireflies and glowing worms.

Angrily, she batters some of "birds" from a nearby branch and turns a corner and confronts another "bird" standing beside the path, identical to the rest but fifty feet high, a colossal St Roc, with his rigid loincloth and crutches sweeping back and forth, his yacking beak expelling thunderous

fragments of words down at her. The next moment an impenetrable screen of trees interposes itself between them.

#5.) Putrefaction: Behind her the grisly coach is still coursing effortlessly after. A burning sensation is seething in her lungs, forcing her to stop running. The burning spreads to her face and across her chest and back, down her abdomen, but her arms and legs are cold. She can feel her skin turning red, then going green, her hands begin to shake, a violent throbbing surges up behind her temples, she feels as if she's been flushed through with mercury, a viscous green-black membrane intermittently blocking her throat, and with it a rancid putrefying taste in her mouth, bitter and sour, stinking vapors rustling up into her sinuses, her eyes are hot and red, wanting to water but too dry, curdling in their sockets and leeching color, becoming cheesy, crumbling, something rifling through her, fingers and toes blackening, first sooting then blanching her face to bruise purple and green, like a steady winding clockwork ticking out threads of burning bile down into her muscles and bones, and parching her skin until it's straining all over to split. Inside she can feel her heart collapsing and her organs shriveling and quaking uncontrollably.

#6.) Disfigurement: Suddenly her right leg twists erupting gouts of sweet toothache pain as the brittle bone ruptures in three places. She clenches her teeth tightly down against it and staggers along the path, from tree to tree emitting little screams, and grinning as well—he's really laying it on, or if not him, *something*, something like the story forcing her toward the end. A rustling from off the path—nearby she can see gleaming metal braces slithering in the bracken like predatory animals, waiting to spring, hoping to solder themselves around her shattered leg. Clinging to the trunk of her tree as if it were a liferaft, she inadvertently scrabbles at the bark—green crust crinkles under her fingernails and copper red beams underneath. With failing eyes she scans the border of the path and then, her mouth bubbling with horrible mirthless laughter as her leg yaws beneath her, she hobbles to another tree, hugging it to her chest as her knees buckle in splinters of exhausting pain. She presses one eye right to its knobby trunk—the “bark” is a thick layer of tarnish, but from the smell she knows it's silver beneath. Again her eyes twitch across the trees lining the path, and with her last ounce of strength she flings herself toward one that stands out even through a blanket of pumice moss and heavy shadows from the trees that seem to huddle conspiratorially about it. She embraces the trunk, slumping forward,

mashing her face against the uncorrupted gold, a fissure draining amber. As surely as silver follows copper, gold follows silver, and she knows this. A chemical mist steams off the tree from its roots, and she breaths it in, feeling the gold pouring coolly into her eyes, spreading cool and calm vapor from her lungs and rippling across her skin, through her hair, reddening her blood from green-black, driving the green from her face, breathing the corruption from her, since gold is hers. It plays numbing fingers along the ruins of her leg, aligning and knitting the bones back as they were, rotating her foot back into its proper aspect, easing wrenched joints back into their beds.

She hangs there until she feels well again, her feet sound beneath her again, striding along peeling the “moss” from the bark, exposing the rosy, reflective surface dripping amber here and there. She takes a single drop of it on her tongue to refresh her, and steps back onto the path, crushing zinc blades of grass beneath her feet. But the coach is still approaching, almost on top of her, and she is forced to flee, though she wants to fight.

#7.) Vertigo: There, beyond the trees, the path follows the line of the shore, running along white chalk cliffs and heaps of black rock down below. Stretching off to her left are low, dismal hills covered with clover, and sulfurous figures moving alone or in pairs dot the peaks and dip into the shallow valleys between. The ocean is purple like new wine, with roving patches of luminous emerald; the sky is still the same blank, glowing gray. The chalk path traces the contours of the cliffs. Glancing behind her, she can see the coach racing after her out of the middle distance. Her foot slips and she turns around again, staggering only a foot or so away from the edge. The path is creeping steadily over toward the sea, until the brink of the drop becomes its right margin—but she doesn’t dare leave the path.

The path is getting narrower still, and slippery. She’s treading its left margin like a tightrope trying not to fall, but the ground is beginning to crumble. She looks below, and she can see the Golem, keeping pace with her down on the rocks, with a white sheet in his hands. The horses are each holding a corner of the sheet in their teeth, stretching it to form a crude equilateral triangle, ready to catch her when she falls. At every moment she feels as though she’s tipping over toward them, and having a target only makes it worse. The Golem’s face is impassive, unreadable, staring up at her if anything with a plaintive expression, but the horses are nodding their skull-painted heads mockingly, lifting their hooves high and prancing

jauntily over the stones. A chunk of wet earth crumbles beneath her feet and she swings round slamming into the slope, digging her fingers into the soft clay and fumbling for a firmer purchase. Her feet are waving in the air, but her fingers latch on to something like a buried pipe or a heavy tree root (although there are no trees anywhere), and she seizes it with white knuckles. She can hear them flapping the sheet invitingly below. She holds on.

A sickening lurch and she can feel her feet beginning to angle upwards, away from the cliff face. The cliff is falling forward. A moment later it stops, having tilted ninety degrees—small stones and clods of earth come skipping across the ground and ricochet past her into open air. The waves crash straight up just a little beyond her. Looking back, she can still see them, standing sideways in midair with their sheet at the same distance beneath her feet as before. With no cliff to lean on her arms are weakening, and she tries to worm her fingers deeper into the mud around the pipe, working her palms around it to support herself.

Another jerk and the cliff is plummeting forward again. She is hanging straight “up” from the ground, as if she were standing on her head, and the Golem and his horses are hovering immediately above, upside down. If she lets go and misses them, she’ll fall right up to the top of the dome, or perhaps straight through and out into the sky, into space. Now the fatigue in her aching hands and arms is becoming hot pain, her shoulders are straining to pop from their sockets, a hideous squeamish feeling ripples across the soles of her feet and in her knees at the thought of falling, and her palms begin to sweat. She wants to pull forward and curl up against the pipe and wait for things to right themselves. She closes her eyes, her mind racing.

She hangs there a moment more. Her face goes slack, placid. Then she flutters her eyelashes. Three tiny fountains of white butterflies sprout from the ground around her hands like gouts of living foam, looping around her in threads until she’s cocooned herself in a cage of flapping wings. She releases the pipe, and then hangs there in her cloud of butterflies. They turn her right side up to the cliffs and carry her inland. Then, what light there is abruptly evaporates, and the butterflies with it. For a moment, she is completely swallowed by a shadow.

#8.) Graves: She can feel the cool powder of the path like finely sifted flour against her cheek. As she rises and takes a step, graves gape open to either side of the path where she stands, and out of the hazy distance a pair

of tombstones come rolling up and plant themselves at the end of each grave. And something besides, hiding behind the stones or in the shadows down in the graves, moving opposite her to keep out of sight, crouched down, but also always aware of her, observing her from only a few feet away. Experimentally, she takes another step. Another pair of graves, another pair of rolling headstones, and possibly two others behind them, hiding. She walks quickly up the path and over the rise ahead, keeping her eyes fixed on the road and ignoring the graves, headstones, and whatever they conceal like a pedestrian storming past a knot of beggars, even as their numbers grow with each step.

Once over the ridge, she observes her path winding among a vast open landscape of graves, all as alert to her as if she was an actress just appearing after the overture. Nervous, she hesitates a moment before continuing forward, unsure even of what she's frightened will happen. It is always and only the sense that they're watching, and hiding. She strains her ears, cocking her head a little forward, thinking perhaps she might be able to hear them shifting about to avoid being seen, but they emit no sound, nor do they ever hide less than perfectly, invisible, but she is positive now that they are there.

The air is getting oppressively hot and freighted with the smell of fresh dirt from the graves and wisteria, whose vines embrace every stunted tree and every grave marker, growing fat on the fertilized ground. The branches are bloated and luxuriant, waving humid fresh leaves lazily at her and bobbing clusters of purple blossoms overripe with perfume. As she notices the wisteria she can see also a mausoleum sitting on a low hummock. The path brings its front around where she can see—one stacked inside another like Russian dolls, and each made of translucent, rose-colored marble panels that absorb and magnify both the light, turning it a glowing pink, but also concentrating the wisteria aroma into threads of purple smoke, wreathing it around on all sides like ivy, or incense. The doors of all the mausoleums are open, one within the other, and the Golem is hovering in the very center, hanging from the neck. Twisting there, precisely framed by the door, swathed in tissues of pink light, with his grimy coat and dirty, hanging hands, and the team standing to either side of the outer door, holding their plumed heads high and immobile like statues. As he rotates toward her, their eyes meet for a moment. His have been waiting for her with an expression of resignation.

But he has caught up with her already, she thinks, and has her in the palm of his hand right now. It is only a matter of closing his hand upon her, to capture her, but he hasn't—and now she realizes he won't. Even from this great distance he seems to say: "Isn't that enough? Aren't you satisfied?" She is tired, and tempted to explain—but then they both would have suffered for nothing. And behind him, the sky is turning pink in a perfect halo behind the mausoleum, causing the whorled, conch-shaped glass ornaments that line its roof to pulse with a violet glow. A sound like hundreds of crickets sawing uniformly back and forth rises all around her from the tombstones, and looking down she can see the graves are all linked together by a network of circular communicating passageways, lit by strings of Christmas lights embedded in the soft walls. She looks up again as the first rays of magenta light patter coldly across her cheeks and brow, dazzling her. The Golem's face is reduced to a watery gray smear with shining eyes, stretching diagonally as she squints into increasing radiance. Then her heart hardens. When the time comes—soon enough. He is harrowing her; she knew he would.

When she opens her eyes again, she is standing in a low-ceilinged chamber with cinderblock walls and greasy, oblong windows set high off the stained cement floor. A door covered with rusty sheets of tin hangs open on a concrete courtyard outside. A staircase yawns at her back, and further up—the reports of the Golem's leg hulking down after her? Without hesitation she strides quickly out the door and starts crossing the courtyard, a building looming up behind her, a brick wall, crumbled to the ground in the far corner, to one side, and cement walls opposite and ahead of her, a staircase leading to street level. Cities full of stairs.

#9.) Paralysis: Making straight for the stairs, she feels inertia gather numbly in her joints and jacket her limbs in lead. Like a great heavy hand pressing down on her she feels it slowing her, stopping her, freezing her in her tracks, and she is doggedly reaching . . .

#10.) Darkness: A cold, ruddy darkness closes around her eyes pressing them down into her cheeks, and as it rushes in to meet her Christine reluctantly resorts to an old substitution trick:

The Golem takes his hands from her eyes and turns her around. Miss Woodwind glares back at him with shining eyes, grinning. Christine is standing at the top of the stairs some distance away.

He makes to swerve around but Miss Woodwind seizes his arms with a grip like a vice—"Where do you think you're going?"

Christine is dwindling back into the shadows.

The Golem is trying to twist free, but Miss Woodwind matches him move for move.

"Go on Christine!" she tosses gaily over her shoulder.

Christine is gone.

The Golem takes Miss Woodwind by the arms and tries to wrench her away, but she doesn't falter, still peering fixedly into his face, grinning gleefully.

Unable to restrain himself he leans forward and seizes her by her narrow waist. He can hear her throaty chuckle by his right ear, her perfume wafts around his face to his nostrils as he lifts her off the ground and carries her to a corner. Presently, she has him with his head in her lap, sitting in the corner where the wall has crumbled almost to the ground, opening up a view of the park.

"What a simpleton you are!" she says glaring down at him, running her fingers tenderly across his face, fine copper wires peeling back through the skin at his temples weaving a garland around his head, sprouting tiny brass leaves and clusters of berries—bulbs of glass flickering with minute jets of current. From time to time her fingers brush against the wires and the entire assembly vibrates with a quiet rattle. Oblivious, the Golem merely gazes back up at her with a contented expression, blinking stupidly. She seems to have him.

Off to one side, he can see a bronze figure standing against the horizon, with his back turned. He lies there, watching it, while she sits warm and dimly visible above him.

Although she's been speaking all the time, her voice only now rises to become intelligible. "Where does your power come from?"

"I don't have any power."

"Don't be stupid," she tugs one of his forelocks. "I've seen you do all sorts of unearthly things."

"I never do anything."

"You just sail along on your trapeze and your path simply opens before you?"

"No."

"Well then what?"

“I only make the gestures.”

“But then who completes them? The Divinity Student?”

“Yes and no.”

“He never does anything either—so then, his Divinity?”

“Our Divinity.”

“And he passes it along to you?”

“Yes and no.”

“And your strength, too?”

“The papers that fill my body cavity are lighter than your organs.”

“But your body seems more ponderous, almost too heavy for you to carry.”

“It is denser, for being simpler and more abstract.”

“So then, when you threw me across the room,” she scrapes a fingernail lightly across his eye, “it was your Divinity reaching down to flick me away, like a fly? Or was it the Divinity Student?”

“I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t he tell you anything?”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“You’re his agent, he must tell you things!”

“I’m not an agent like you.”

Miss Woodwind looks down at him sharply.

“I know that Griepentrog sent you,” the Golem says.

“He didn’t—I agreed to go, for reasons of my own, and he offered to help, for reasons of his own!” She is looking dangerously angry.

“But Griepentrog can’t get down here, while you can. He knew that. He wanted you to come after me, or he wanted you to open the way for him to come down after me, or both.”

“I’m not an agent because I don’t take orders. He and I have a bargain, with your former employers. And you’ve evaded my question—how do you know what to do?”

“I’m his machine. I do what I’m supposed to.”

“How do you know what you’re supposed to do?”

“I can’t do any different.”

“How did you get that way?”

“He made me this way.”

“Who, the Divinity Student or the Divinity?”

“Both.”

“One through the other?”

“Yes.”

“And did he make me, too? And everything?” She holds out her hands indicating everything around them. “Everything we can see?”

“Yes.”

“And are we all formed according to what we’re supposed to do?”

“Yes and no.”

“Not the same as you?”

“No.”

“Or the Divinity Student—I keep forgetting he made you.”

“He and I are the same.”

“Same but different?”

“Yes.”

She sneers a little.

“Only the most trivial difference. We are essentially the same,” he says.

He can barely see her face. Her mouth is only an irregular darkness; her voice seems to come from everywhere and nowhere.

“What makes you different from me, or Christine?”

“Christine is different from you.” Miss Woodwind ignores him. “Why did he make you different?”

“He needed a new body.”

“Why?”

“I have no reasons.”

“If his body was falling apart, why didn’t he restore it?—Isn’t it that he can’t restore it? . . . And that he can’t come down here himself?”

“Everything you say is perfectly true.”

“You are your Divinity, embodied? He must be a very abject god.”

“It’s possible—or perhaps he’s abject because I’m abject—he and I—what he and I do affects him as well.”

“But you do whatever he wants.”

“Having it done changes things for him.”

Miss Woodwind is silent a minute. “. . . But the Divinity Student is all but dead. Why leave him that way? Why not bring him back to life? Why cause you to be made in the first place?”

“He will be brought back to life again.”

“Through you?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Through this?” She makes a vague gesture, indicating everything.

“Yes.”

“Christine is going to be sacrificed to bring him back, isn’t that it?”

“We will both be sacrificed. We are making our sacrifices right now.”

“You and she?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“We exhaust ourselves.”

“And when you are both fully exhausted? You will have sacrificed enough?”

“Yes.”

“And then what?”

“We will be married.”

“But won’t that be a defeat for her? Isn’t that what she’s trying to avoid?”

“Christine can’t be defeated.”

“Then why bother trying?”

“We will stalemate.”

“I’ll bet you will!” Miss Woodwind snorts. “—But what would fighting to impasse achieve?”

“It’s the only way.”

“Why?”

“Christine is that way, she needs things to be like that.”

“ . . . Suppose Christine isn’t satisfied? Has it ever occurred to you that she might not want to be sacrificed?”

“She can’t be defeated, no matter what she does. Whatever sacrifice is asked of her, she’s making it now.”

“What is she getting in return?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“You mean you don’t know.”

“That’s right.”

“But suppose Christine doesn’t help, won’t the Divinity Student be dead forever?”

“Not forever.”

Miss Woodwind grumbles for a moment. “Even if he was fully restored to life, won’t he still be mortal? Couldn’t he be killed again?”

“I suppose he’ll always come back.”

“And so on and on and nothing more? What good is that?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“Does that mean your Divinity is coming and going like that as well?”

“Yes and no.”

“Then you’re saying that your Divinity is dying and living all the time.”

“Of course.”

“Well what is it that’s killing him—other gods? Nature?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the Divinity Student, after he is restored, what happens to you, to Christine? Do you die?”

“No, we will all live.”

“Where will you be?”

“That’s hard to say. We will all be in the house he is building for us.”

“Never mind, that’s far enough. That’s too far.”

Miss Woodwind pauses a moment and gazes out across the wall to the park. The wind twirls the trees like its petticoats, rushing like waves.

“ . . . And so he completes your gestures—why don’t you do something for me then?”

“No, he won’t do it like that. And he doesn’t exactly complete my gestures. The gestures aren’t wholly mine, and the intention is both mine and his. I can’t make anything happen myself, at my whim.”

She screws up her lips.

“You’ll get your proof soon enough,” the Golem says.

“Did he make you say that?”

“Yes.”

“What proof?”

“I don’t know. But I’m certain it’s true.”

“Is your god as ugly as you?” she asks peevishly.

“Uglier,” he grins back at her.

Miss Woodwind snorts. “Of course, he would have to be more of everything, wouldn’t he.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” the Golem yawns.

She sits still peering intently down at him, playing with his hair, caressing his face, murmuring absently to herself with parted lips moist

with venom. The Golem continues to return her gaze, dreamily looking around, out over the park. A breeze stirs through his wire wreath, blowing his eyes—Miss Woodwind's eyes, always probing, follow his gaze—the breeze comes down from the sky and blows his eyes over toward the park. The trees elongate and whirr together like rows of clockworks on stalks ticking down wound springs, so that their branches play out corresponding calligraphies, opening a deeper view. Something is scintillating deep within them, that dapples Miss Woodwind's face with roving gleams of faint light, blurred by the warmth and softness of her skin, the continual emanation of her perfume. They trickle up and down her face, distracting her, making it difficult for her to concentrate.

“So . . .” she says, trying to pull words up out of the stream always whispering between her lips like thin plumes of smoke, “. . . does your . . . Divinity . . . ever . . . address you?”

“Hmm?”

“Does he ever . . . speak to you?” she says more forcibly.

“Yes and no.”

“He never gives reasons?”

“Not what you would call reasons.”

“Well then—what . . . what does . . . ?” She puts her hand to her head. Tiny lights seep in and out between her fingers and dangle in droplets from her eyelashes.

“You’re like a horrible machine,” she says, her voice stifled deep in her throat. “The trouble is finding the switch to turn—you—off!” punctuating the last three words by twisting his nose. His eyes are rolling slowly in their sockets, and she peers out into the dark to find what he’s looking at. They circle round to the park again. Caught, she follows his gaze.

She looks again, against her will, out over the wall. She sees the fountain kaleiding among the trees, and the octopus hovering almost in midair, staring glacially right into her eyes, its own eyes, with their alien, bilobed pupils, icing out continual rays of grainy ocean cold, framed on all sides by clammy boneless flesh, shimmering through delayed colors and patterns, fragments and coagulations along vectors like mirror edges/facets streaking along the planes and curves of her face, like frost-ferns of color and cellular divisions in pattern, dividing and consuming each other, flashing in her flinty eyes and showering sparks down her cheeks to her chin. Her features are going slack she’s muttering, trying to speak to him as he coils upward

onto his feet, and she stays seated, unable to follow, her face the axis for a spinning ring of reflected kaleiding. Her eyes flick to gray-gold, mustering her forces, and he knows better than to stay, turning for the last time to face the city and Christine hidden within it.

But paralyzed as she is, Miss Woodwind's hand, resting on her lap, feels the edges of the Golem's Book through the fabric of her skirt's left hip pocket. She will disappear before he discovers the theft.

THE CATHEDRAL

Days go by and the Golem does not appear again. He seems to have gone. For Christine, he can only get farther and farther away. She's been staying in her enormous apartment with many small rooms. The days run by, watery and indistinct—no sign, and an intolerable derailed feeling grows and grows. The city rustles all around her, unmassed human shadows scatter like windblown cinders in the squares and along the streets, and dash against the bobbing foundations of the buildings. A terrible claustrophobia wrings her heart—she is stuck fast. She cannot return to San Veneficio. Given certain terms of her contract she is to wait the sufferance of certain signs, and these continue not to come. If they never do, she will never leave. When the fruit falls from the tree and is severed from its greater life, it isn't dead or alive: it's undead and potentially either, food for new flesh or new leaves. No Golem, and Christine fades away without a trace. After the Exodus a Pharaoh can only sit and stare bored and boring his half-empty empire, eventually to dwindle and to petrify into a million obsolete statues, mummies, museum exhibits.

Christine is now poised romantically at the water's edge—she leans on the railing of the floating dock and sends her thoughts out aimlessly over the tarry water. Gray slate dome dimly lit from below with a wan spectral light to the horizon, the air between water and “sky” is black. Suddenly Miss Woodwind is there, coyly smiling at her from the doorway of a shambolic bait shack whose decrepitude clashes with her stylish coat. She steps to the rail and stands by it.

“Hello, Christine.”

Christine is hardening, her face glows white as paper, her coral mouth and green eyes light up.

“How dare you walk up to me and start a conversation like an old chum —what have you done?!” These last words are uttered nearly silently but they shake Miss Woodwind with stunning violence.

“I have something—”

“How dare you interfere!?” A slap in each word. Fireworks pop and crackle on the pier flash and jerk in the corners by the walls and in the windows of the bait shack.

“Do you want to know or don’t you?” Miss Woodwind replies obstreperously.

“Well?”

“I took it while he lay with his head in my lap—I’ve hidden it in a safe place. I know you want it—I know why you came here—I overheard everything you told Magellan. I’ll give you the Book.”

Christine leans against the rail, all her explosive vehemence gone, smiles a long slow smile. “Is that so?” Now she knows—he can’t pursue her effectively without that Book—that’s why she hasn’t seen him lately.

“That is so,” Miss Woodwind is saying.

“You can’t read his Book, can you? You’ve tried and tried, for weeks now, and now it’s on to plan B.”

Miss Woodwind’s nostrils flare. “I’ll give it to you, if you’ll tell me what it says.”

“What makes you think I can read it?”

“You can’t?”

“No.”

“Well then, what are we here for? He’s after you—if you had the Book

—”

“What do I want with a Book I can’t read?”

“What are you playing at? You’re trying to keep away from him, aren’t you?”

“Why whatever gave you that idea?”

“Don’t be silly, without the Book he’s slower, he’s far less likely to catch you—”

“Then shouldn’t you be talking to him?”

“—as I was saying,” Miss Woodwind glares, “he’s less likely to catch you, but he still could—he has all the time in the world, and you’re trapped down here meanwhile—he’s bound to catch up with you sooner or later.”

“I suppose.”

“Translate the Book and we can both get out of here!”

“I’ve already told you, I can’t read it. Only he can read it.”

“Why?”

“Because only he has died and been brought back.”

“I don’t believe you—we could make something out if we tried—”

“Why should I help you?”

“Why should *you* help *me*?! Who stole his Book for you? Who saved you from him twice?”

“I didn’t ask for any favors.”

“You won’t help?”

“Why should I?”

“Are you honestly so stupid?! Or do you have a way out . . . a way out that I don’t know . . .”

Christine’s smile stretches.

“This has all been set up!” Miss Woodwind stares back at her openmouthed.

“Don’t feel bad—there are many things I didn’t tell Magellan . . . and that I certainly wouldn’t tell you. You came here thinking to profit yourself with some stolen knowledge, you came here on Griepentrog’s behalf, and for the sake of the Seminary. You have interfered in something that was none of your affair, and now in your ignorance you come offering me your worthless deals. I’ve already made a better bargain by far and I have earned what I was promised.”

With a calm blast of rebuking force Christine vanishes as a low, thick, heavy wind is vomited from black air, icy black waves, walls and vaults of frigid stone, invisible horizon.

Christine stands in the cupola of a towering victorian sort of building, railed along the roof with iron spikes which glow with a soft blue flame whenever lightning strikes the ground overhead—they are glowing now. A little wind trickles down from the vault and jabs into her with a shock with the thought of the Golem, whose vision lit her and made her dazzling, and her heart hardens as hard as a diamond brought fresh from the furnace sizzling against the air, the heat has not made it white-hot but clear-hot, so that its clarity burns back—she can see that this world is poised, even after all this time it is still poised in pain, waiting for her act, which can end the story. That is, the world of this story will begin and end with the pitch on one fulcrum, a diamond bullet flaring in her chest, lacing through every part of her a clear-hot stream of starry molten diamond. As the wind rises from across the dull black ridges of the water, she’s ferocious, strong, diamond-hard and clear-scalding, she seems to loom to the roof of the vault.

Stepping into a ravishing white spotlight that carves its circle on the stones of the balcony, Christine shrugs, removes a scintillating feathered cape revealing a pearl white trapeze costume. She poses on the balcony, the light rebounding from her white skin and teeth and shining like a beacon over the city, her ivory arms shoulders and neck emerging from her glistening white costume like lilies from a vase, all invoking the Golem.

Through the vault the great starry heavens are palpable, shrieking down through the stone, and what is howling further beyond that, where the light fails, is coming down somehow in soaring panic. Beyond the city lights the wall of the vault suddenly roars and splits, sending huge chunks of stone down into the water, raising waves to dash against the pilings and scatter them, pound them apart, the fabric of this flimsy, badly realized city crumbling and tearing to shreds. In the growing aperture in the vault wall, Christine can see something huge, like a filigreed stone wedge, plunging down, parting the rock in a big V. From it issues a deafening pounding of bells, through which the ravings of a howling organ intermittently escape. A tall bulb of neatly fitting stone blocks and pierced just above center by a huge circular window of florid, furious colors—Christine rushes back into the cupola and hastily throws on her clothes—running out across the railed roof she sees this stone ram has sprouted two level wings, glittering with stained glass like a coat of mail. As she reaches the door, she witnesses the appearance of spire and the long shaft of the nave, copper medallions green with verdigris at intervals along the ridge of its peaked roof like a spine—when these appear she knows what she is looking at.

Christine flits out onto the street and down the length of a stone pier, wafted almost off her feet by puffs of hot air from slicks of burning oil on the surface of the water. The bells and the shriekings of the organ stop at once. The cathedral has disencumbered itself entirely of the wall and has precipitated itself onto the waves; the churchyard, crypts, and the slab of earth into which graves and apartments were sunk with the foundations, have been borne along with the building, and now form an island bristling with leafless, rook-haunted trees. Their sardonic calls rasp along the cavern walls to reach her. She sees colossal turbines of perfectly smooth-polished black stone attached to the sides of the cathedral like barnacles, and as she observes them, they start up, with a stern low vibration like the orchestra's trombones—with a noise like slowly splintering wood, the arc lights crackle and ignite, one in each window and two in the spire, spreading their brilliant

rays over the water. Softly at first, and as a snowy mist begins to rise from the foundations and spill out in all directions, the bells in the spire beckon to her. Their knells are so light, they sound as if they were being brushed rather than struck.

Christine looks around—finds a heavy iron rail lying jumbled in a pile of old tackle. She pries the pier loose with the rail, the moldering wood crumbles and spreads apart like stale hard cheese. The pier lurches free—Christine stands balanced in the center. The current bears her across the water, the current pulls her into the mist’s clammy folds. Bump—stone steps. Christine climbs and the cathedral door is ajar before her, exhaling a smell of old cloth, leather, dust, wax, varnish. As she steps inside, the statues reach up and snuff the lights, the doors swing shut behind her, and the world outside the walls roars. There is an earsplitting crack and then a tumult of battering stone outside while inside all is silent.

Diamonds sparkling in her hair, she drapes her head in a gleaming white veil. Christine begins to make her way down the aisle toward the altar. About halfway there and she is brought up short by a sound. The Golem appears, mingled with the shadows at the end of the aisle, his joints creaking. They observe each other.

“ . . . Why did you call me? Have you changed your mind?”

His voice, ragged with crippled, valiantly struggling hope, speaks from out of a well of sadness dark and cold; but all the same, she is ready to run should he take a step toward her.

“ . . . I know Miss Woodwind stole your Book from you—and that without it, you couldn’t find me. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.” She can see the glints of his moist eyes, and a rhomb of light across his brow, but the mouth that speaks is invisible in the dark.

“I didn’t think that was fair.”

“Thank you.”

It’s as though they are paralyzed and constrained to speak, although they still must improvise the words. Distant splashes are audible somewhere outside the walls, and another sound whose point of origin is more difficult to place, a whirring that seems to come from overhead, and might be very gradually growing louder.

“ . . . I’m curious—without your Book, how can you go on uh living . . . ? You are a Golem—”

“The writing that keeps me alive is in here,” he prods his abdomen, muffled noise of damp paper crumpling. “The writing in the Book lends me its power, when it’s needed.”

He takes a step forward, and now she can see his face. His calm, measured speech belies the look of anguish this reveals. His features are drawn and seared with exasperation. Christine takes a step backwards.

“Why did you call me here? Are you teasing me?”

“I might be.”

She is too hard to be broken, he is too inexhaustible to be consumed.

He takes another step—she tenses a little, but does not step away.

“Are you testing me?”

“I might be.” She hears another splash outside.

“Our marriage was arranged. If you intended to break the engagement, I don’t think you would run. I don’t think you would have called me.” He takes another step. She tenses a little more, but does not retreat.

“You wanted to know if I would suffer for your sake.” He takes another step—he is now only a couple of yards from her. She leans a little backwards but does not take a step.

“Yes,” she says, a little distracted.

He takes another step toward her—he is now so close she can smell his smell—formaldehyde, freshly turned earth, wet wool.

“If you run again, I will not be able to find you. You should decide now.”

From out of nowhere a tiny white card flutters down in front of Christine’s face—in Miss Woodwind’s sardonic handwriting it says “BEST WISHES ON YOUR WEDDING DAY.” Miss Woodwind stands smiling at the end of the aisle by the door.

“I object,” she says gaily. “The arrangement you mention is a sham. She has no intention of marrying you,” she adds snickering. “She never did.”

The Golem looks sharply at Christine.

“She’s right, isn’t she?”

Christine says nothing. Miss Woodwind snickers again. The echoes of her voice crinkle against the stones.

The whirring sound grows suddenly louder—and now Christine recognizes it: the flapping roar of a fire. In the darkened recess of the apse’s ceiling, above the altar, a gargantuan bell swings down, a metal ring of shade with a massive, swift clapper, and the moment before the clapper

strikes the bells above begin to ring, the knells cascading into each other—the bell above the altar strikes with a crash that wrenches the floor dashes prayer books and hymnals from the pew shelves and spins them in flurries like dead leaves. With an awesome hum the bell falls back and the clapper strikes again on the far side, the report blurs the pews, Christine and Miss Woodwind reel and grapple on to the pillars like sailors on the tilting deck of a storm-tossed ship, but the Golem remains braced upright. The mammoth bell bangs again and again, Christine, hanging onto the iron grillwork of one of the side chapels, feels its reverberations through the floor, her hands buzz and her bones stutter together and her ears shriek in chords.

Now the spaces between the chimes lengthen. The protracted vibration of its tones settles into the building. Christine ventures to release the grillwork and stagger out into the aisle again, where the Golem stands unmoved, and Miss Woodwind, nearby, doggedly clutches a pillar behind her back. The long vibrations of the bell have altered the composition of the cathedral's fabric, making it less opaque. Through the transparent slabs she can see the dead bodies interred beneath the floor, each one clutching a jar of preserves in its hands against the time when their jars will in turn be opened and their sweetness enjoyed by the one who sealed them there. A thunderous crack, like a cannon shot, rocks the floor—a shadow sweeps the cathedral, and when it passes, the statues have all acquired outspread wings of polished cherry wood, from each one new limber branches, drooping with clusters of glistening black cherries, have sprouted.

Color bleaches from the windows of the apse. The glass becomes transparent and clear, and evaporates. The leaded partitions that held the pieces together are the writhing, stiff branches of trees, which lean in through the windows and raise their bare boughs up into the shadows. Trembling sleeves of blonde flame slide down the walls of the apse, and the boughs become engorged, limber, and bristle with metallic black leaves. Black bulbs of flame, clustered like black cherries, dangle down from the shadows of the boughs. The volutes of smoke that billow from them, though dark as pitch, are cool like mist from off the ice, and possess only a weak, resinous odor, like frankincense. This smoke collects beneath the ceiling in a violently disturbed mass—the whirring sound now grows rapidly louder still—the Golem suddenly steps toward the apse, the altar, with a slow but not infirm step, and now the Divinity Student drops from

the mass on telescoping metal rods, trailing tendrils of smoke trapped in his clothes. The two pools of smoke clinging to his eye sockets are the last to disperse, their dregs scattered to the surrounding air by the sudden fluttering of his eyelashes.

His body is as withered and wasted as a burnt log, white ashes flick from him and spin down like snowflakes. His face is a lurid white, the skin is tattered, peeling, and laced all over with tiny black splinters. His eyes are filmed with glistening black stuff, like cherry preserves, so that the whites, which are now yellow as cheese, are visible only in patches, and the iris and pupil gleam with a faraway starry, black-red glare. The livid mouth sags a little from obsidian teeth. He is looking at Miss Woodwind, who has released her grip on the pillar.

“Well thief,” he says, his voice crumpled, his tone guttural, low but penetrating, “did you find what you came here to know?”

His manner indicates that he is not expecting, and would not welcome, any answer to his questions.

“Are you satisfied?”

His voice rivets Miss Woodwind to the floor, stops up her mouth, squeezes her whole body in a press. There is more resignation in it than anger.

“Trying to steal the words I suffered and died for, to use *my* words to tell *your lies*.”

He swings toward her on silent, telescoping rods.

“Ruining my experiment with your selfish interference.”

He is closer.

“All in order to steal secrets that you cannot understand.”

With great boldness and effort, Miss Woodwind asks, “Why not?”

“You never paid their price.”

“What price?”

He swings closer.

“What price?” she asks again, shrinking, frightened.

“What you try to steal, it will never be possible for you to steal. I brook no more interference from thieves.”

The Divinity Student makes a vague, small, almost shapeless gesture with his right hand, and as he drifts backwards toward the altar Christine can see his right hand now holds the Golem’s Book.

Without the slightest sensation, without so much as a jar, Miss Woodwind's vision just blurs for a moment; when her eyes focus again, she sees the cathedral's pale lights in the distance. She is standing on the soft, reedy bank of the lake, and the water, dotted with burning oil slicks, stands between her and the cathedral. Miss Woodwind, after the moment of her shock passes, rails and utters loud incoherent cries of frustration, kicking the ground. But the intervening barrier is mere water, and to a master of the element like herself, who can swim without being wetted, this is not an insuperable barrier. Miss Woodwind immediately flings herself from the bank into the water and swims furiously toward the island.

The Divinity Student, as he drifts back to the altar, drops the Golem's book. It falls at an angle, curving down past the Golem, who plucks it from the air with his right hand in a gesture like a man pinching up a bit of cooked rice in his fingers. The Divinity Student stops and descends a bit further, looking down at Christine with a more academic mien.

"I am ending this experiment; with Miss Woodwind's interference, it would no longer be possible to derive a clear result. Now I must ask you, were you able to love the Golem? Think carefully before you answer."

"No." She turns to the Golem, again with an apologetic look.

The Divinity Student also turns to the Golem—"And were you able to love Christine?"

"No," he says, looking up at the Divinity Student.

"It's a shame," the Divinity Student says.

The Golem shakes his head, with a terrible sadness. "She is magnificent—she is admirable."

"Do you love her?"

"—I've failed."

"All that is created here is a failure."

Wobbling lights play over the features of the statues lining the nave, until they all appear to wear the Divinity Student's face.

"These are elevated to saintly status because they are the valuable mistakes, and remain with the creator to remind and reprimand him. One must pursue every avenue in the labyrinth and discovering a cul-de-sac while disappointing contributes usefully to our knowledge—one goes on trying to be methodical but relying always on a judgment and patience that can neither of them be adequate, so relying too on luck—these experiments . . . trial and error.

“The Golem is an experiment of the Divinity Student and the Divinity Student is an experiment himself. Because not everything is known, and even one’s own knowledge is seldom if ever perfectly understood, we experiment. Your principle purpose here was not to love, but to suffer, to live. The faculty of life that I lent you must now be returned to me with that interest you have accrued in your experiences down here.”

He turns to Christine. “You upheld your end of the bargain admirably, and never broke our confidence—and, while it did not last long—long enough. Come forward, and receive your payment.”

Christine approaches the Divinity Student, who drops down to just above the floor. He pulls something from the leaves of his Book and hands it to her—a white card with a black engraving on it—as she takes it from him she sees it is undeniably a portrait of her, and apparently very old.

“That’s all?” she asks, looking at the card back and front. She opens it, and sees a smaller card, its corners pinched through slits in the backing, with two sentences written on it.

“Don’t read that yet,” the Divinity Student says. “Not just yet.”

Christine’s face darkens, she looks up at the Divinity Student.

“It is more than it seems. Had you not suffered for them, you would not have understood these words. And had you somehow apprehended their meaning without having first suffered for them, that instant you surely would have died.”

“But,” she begins to ask, gesturing toward his Book.

“This Book is the book of *my* life, not yours. It would mean very little to you. What I give you will prove.”

Christine looks up at his torn face and then nods. She takes a few steps away, and the Divinity Student turns his attention back to the Golem.

“May I stay and watch?” she asks a little hesitantly.

“No.” The Divinity Student makes a small circular flip with his left hand and the door at the end of the transept to the left of the altar swings open. Through the open door, in the even orange light of four beautifully carved jack-o’-lanterns, she can see the gondola of a hot air balloon waiting for her. Christine looks at the Divinity Student, and at the Golem, who stands leaning on his brace, his mouth a bit ajar. Then she strides through the door, which closes with a distinct thud behind her. The Divinity Student waves his stick once in the air and a fragile gust of wind disperses her scent,

leaving only the smell of formaldehyde, dust, freshly turned earth, varnish, wet wool, smoke, wax . . .

The Golem looks up at the Divinity Student. "I never even had a chance."

"I have suffered more. The experiment is over, the city is gone, she is gone, there is nothing for you to do here, and nowhere you can go. You cannot return to the surface but through me. Without you, I will continue to rot forever." He holds out his hands indicating his pitiable condition.

"Will you kill me?"

"Of course not. You will live in me."

"How?"

"We will be someone else, to whose life the life of decay will only contribute."

"Haven't I got a choice?"

"Never. Stand—here," the Divinity Student points with his stick to a spot immediately below him.

Miss Woodwind approaches the cathedral from the far side, through the trees, and its bulk obscures the gaudy, red and gold balloon that rises toward the roof of the cavern on the other. Christine looks up at the stone ceiling—a patch in the gray-black stone proves to be nothing but smoke laced with jets of flame, toward which she is ascending.

Statues and carvings to the roof at every elevation—the windows that faintly shine between the buttress ribcage dim and flare with irregular shadow flurries. Again she comes up to the open door, and slips inside. She looks this way and that, but dark sifts down from the roof like snow—there is no sound is there? She can hear something like cloth being crushed. Slipping her shoes from her feet, Miss Woodwind pads along the wall, under the arches, toward the altar. Now she can just make out a single, enormous figure, slumped on the floor before the altar in a single great mass. A shadow stretches across its upper half, the lower half is invisible under a heavy pall of damp black wool coat. As her eyes become accustomed to the dimness, she can see that the weak, convulsive movements have stopped, it is lying still, and there are two humps on the back somehow. The humps flip up to the sides, and the vast shadow that lay across the front half of the mass flutters, shivers, and rises from the floor.

As the balloon enters the cloud of smoke, Christine hastily opens the card and reads:

WE ARE ALL PHANTOMS
MANUFACTURED FROM WORDS

HOWEVER IT DOES NOT FOLLOW
FROM THIS THAT WE ARE NOT REAL

Miss Woodwind recoils a scream bursting from her mouth, as if utterance could be reflexive like a knee jerk. It has turned toward her, the face invisible in the shade of its great black greasy pinions, hooding the entire figure. Two braced legs slip backwards into their shade. For a silent moment Miss Woodwind lying on the floor and the sound of the greasy separation of sticky feathers. Miss Woodwind bounds to her feet and runs—but the cathedral is confusing—she finds herself darting into a narrow doorway by a peripheral chapel—stairs coiling up toward the roof. From the gushing wind and rattle of plumage she knows it is following her—she flings herself on the steps screaming and clawing. She races straight up through hollow clouds of streetlights and tombstones hanging on rails, beams crisscrossing her course and weaving into subterranean tunnels, waving boughs shattered by its many wings spreading in lightless crystal spears peeling back layers of petrified earth, their colors fluorescing more and more brilliant as she nears the surface. In the first alcove she passes is deposited all her clothing, her skin and her hair. In the second, her eyes, her teeth, her bones. In the third, her muscles. In the fourth, her organs. In the fifth, her nerves and brain. And finally on the final turn—the desert, running away in all directions to the horizon and the ring of mountains black against the black sky pierced by white stars haloed with blue shadows the color of alcohol flames, the desert littered with pairs of reflecting lights reflecting back and piercing . . . the city describes its narrow circle around her feet so high up is she all of a sudden, standing in the highest place, on the pinnacle of the cathedral's tallest spire, at such an elevation that the city's walls appear no bigger than a tiny ridge of stone ringing her feet, she is thrust into the sky as the spire looms higher and higher dilate the stars and lights all around her, not a dome but a field of stars above below and on every hand, and it still immediately behind her but nevertheless she shrinks back almost touching it recoiling in terror with her hands to her mouth she cringes backward trying hysterically but unable to screw shut or avert her eyes, recognizing heaven as it engulfs her.